

Black Summoner: Volume 4

Doufu Mayoi

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BLACK SUMMONER

THE PRISTINE ICE PRINCESS

AUTHOR: DOUFU MAYOI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY: KUROGIN (DIGS)

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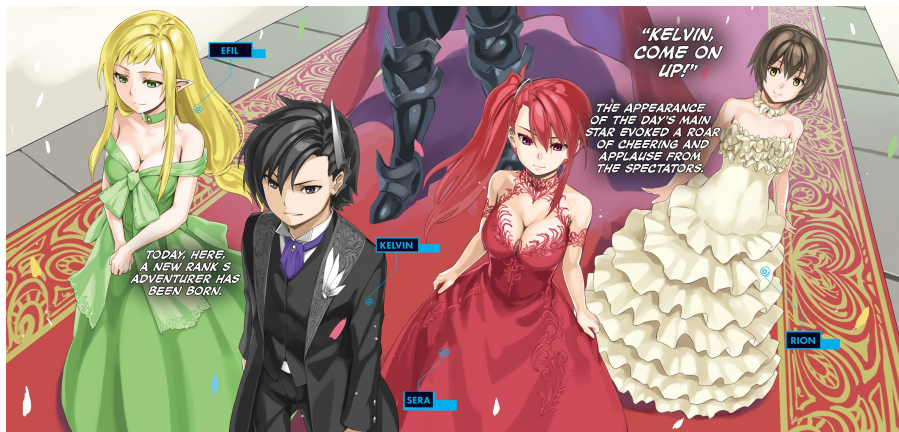
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BLACK SUMMONER

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EFIL

TODAY, HERE,
A NEW RANK 5
ADVENTURER HAS
BEEN BORN.

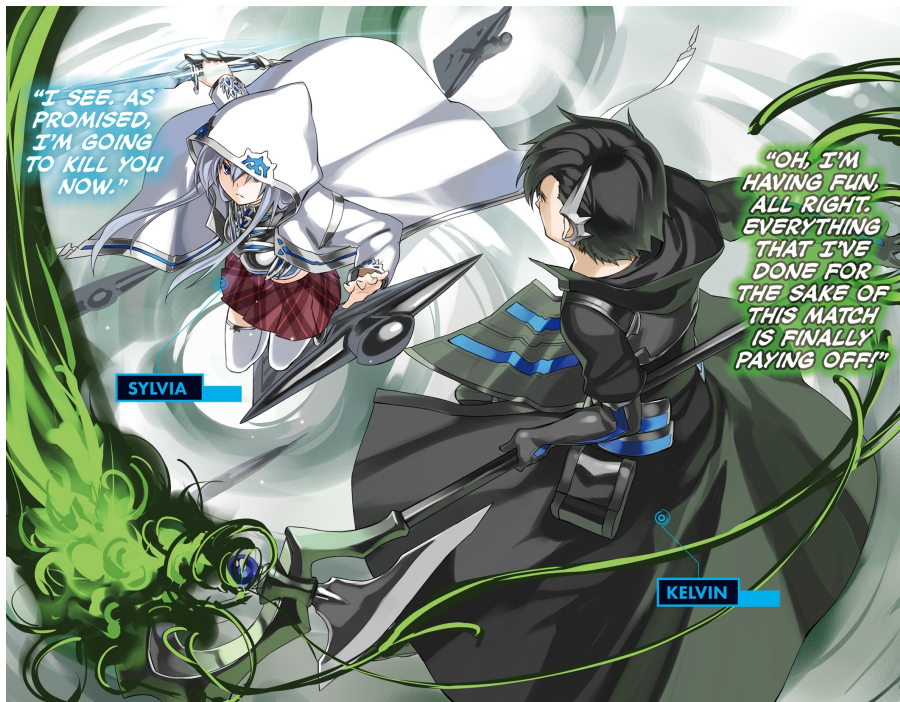
KELVIN

SERA

"KELVIN,
COME ON
UP!"

THE APPEARANCE
OF THE DAY'S MAIN
STAR EVOKED A ROAR
OF CHEERING AND
APPLAUSE FROM
THE SPECTATORS.

RION



"I SEE, AS
PROMISED,
I'M GOING
TO KILL YOU
NOW."

SYLVIA

"OH, I'M
HAVING FUN,
ALL RIGHT.
EVERYTHING
THAT I'VE
DONE FOR
THE SAKE OF
THIS MATCH
IS FINALLY
PAYING OFF!"

KELVIN



BLACK SUMMONER

Characters

Outline as of the Previous Volume

Transmigrator from Japan, battle junkie, and summoner. Kelvin, along with the staunch companions he's experienced countless battles with, finally took on a quest that also served as his Rank S promotion exam. At the Village of Elves, the setting for this quest, he encountered the mixed monster order of the militaristic country of Trycen. After his party crushed Trycen's forces, which were launched in an attempt to kidnap the elves, and beat back their leader, Clive (another transmigrator), Kelvin's promotion was confirmed. He received notice that the entire city of Parth would be hosting festivities in his honor, but to his surprise, part of the program included a practice match between the last promoted Rank S adventurer and himself!

Kelvin

A Summoner who obtained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life. Constantly seeking battles with mighty foes.

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

A half-elf girl purchased by Kelvin as a slave. The perfect maid. Loves her master deeply.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of a demon lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Melfina

Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Rion

A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they're his own grandchildren.



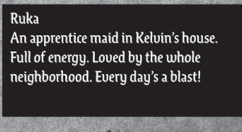
Alex

Kelvin's shadow wolf Follower. Rion's partner. Gets a thorough brushing every day.



Ellie

A maid in Kelvin's house who applied for the job in order to repay him for rescuing her and her daughter, Ruka.



Ruka

An apprentice maid in Kelvin's house. Full of energy. Loved by the whole neighborhood. Every day's a blast!

Parth, the City of Peace

A city located right in between the four great powers of the Eastern Continent. Founded as a symbol of hope for longlasting peace.

Rio

Guildmaster of the Parth Adventurer's Guild.
Quite the schemer. Alias: "Analyzer."

Ange

A popular receptionist at the guild. May have feelings for Kelvin. Would like more screentime.

Toraj, the Country of Water

Faces the Sea of Dragons. Has very advanced shipbuilding and agricultural industries. Rooted in Japanese culture with staples like rice and tatami.



Tsubaki Fujiwara

Queen of Toraj. Has taken a liking to Kelvin and his companions. Constantly tries to solicit their services.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette

Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya

A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Heading for the Western Continent.



Shiga Setsuna

A Hero summoned from Japan. Serious and diligent. Cleans up the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana

A Hero summoned from Japan. Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi

A Hero summoned from Japan. One quarter Russian. Her thoughts are a complete mystery.

Gaun, the Country of Beastkin

The home of the beastkin, who possess superior physical prowess. Its people believe that strength is all. Crowns the strongest person in the country as king.

Leonhart Gaun

The Beast King of Gaun. Served as proctor for Kelvin's Rank S promotion exam.

The Military Kingdom of Trycen

A militaristic country that touts human supremacy. Rumored to be kidnapping the citizens of other countries as slaves and up to similarly suspicious endeavors.

Zel Trycen

King of Trycen. Used to be a reasonable man, but has grown belligerent in a complete change of character.



Shutola Trycen

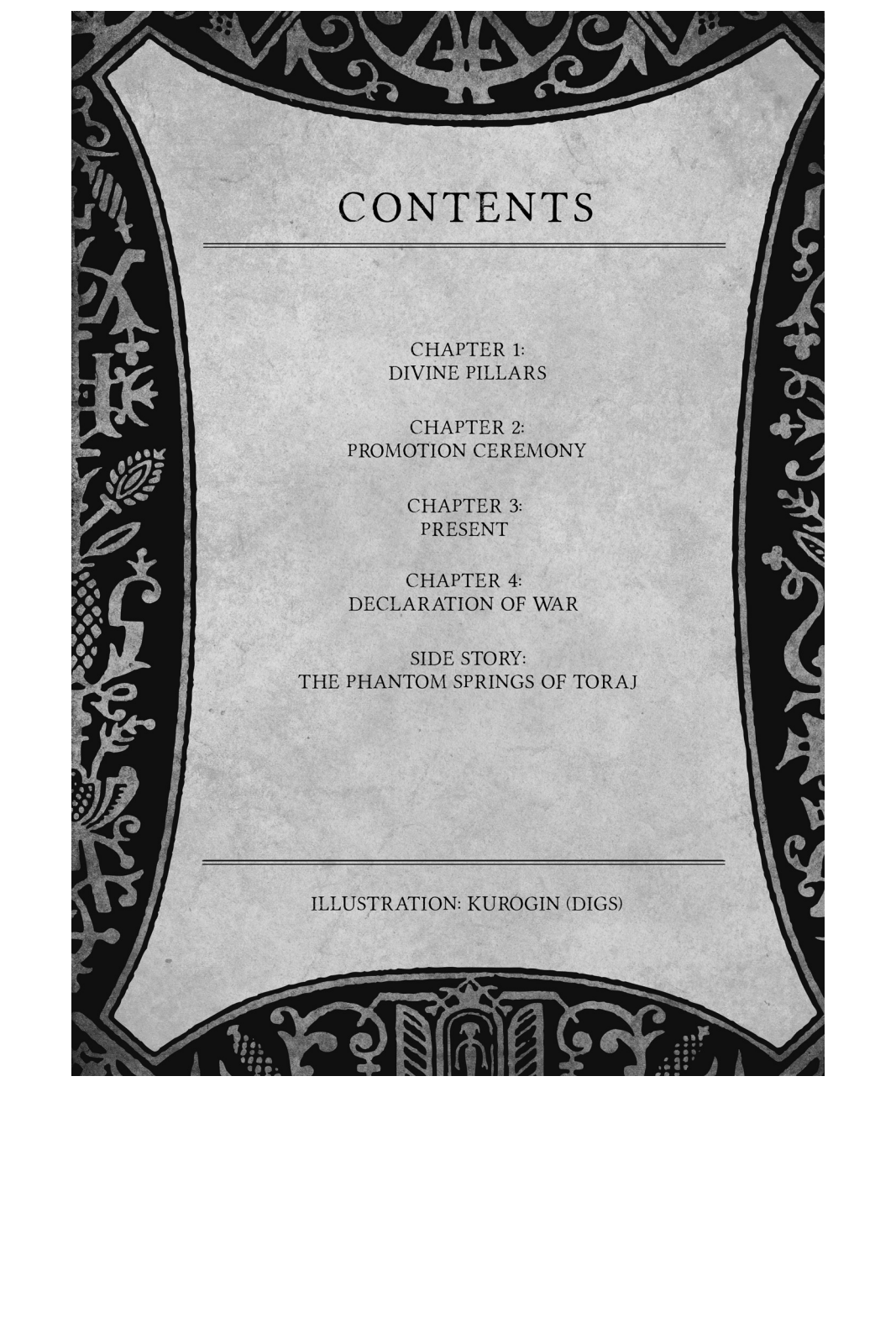
Trycen's one and only princess. General of the Black Ops. Anxious about the future of the country.

Azgrad Trycen

Crown Prince of Trycen. General of the Dragon Knight Order. A master of dragon-riding.

Tristan Faaze

General of the Mixed Monster Order. Plotted Clive's downfall to usurp control of the Magic Knight Order. Seems to have ulterior motives.



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ILLUSTRATION: KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: Divine Pillars

The morning after we returned home, I shared the details of my upcoming promotion ceremony with everyone else over breakfast.

“...so that’s why I have no choice but to have a practice match with a Rank S adventurer three days from now.”

“Oh, that sounds like a wonderful opportunity to go all-out. Good for you, my king.”

“No, no, what are you saying? This is a very grave issue. I don’t even know who I’ll be up against or how powerful he or she is.”

Melfina looked at me pointedly. “So you say, honey, but you’re already smiling.”

“Smiling? I am the very picture of seriousness.”

The way my fight with Clive in the Forest of Crests had ended was quite vexing, even though its premature conclusion had been due to the interference of a third party. Never again would I make such an embarrassing display of myself. To ensure that, I needed to fully master Boreas Death Scythe. I was fully aware that this was no time to be distracted by a practice match with a Rank S adventurer. *So that’s why you guys shouldn’t look at me with such knowing eyes.*

“Uh, Kel-nii, you do realize you’re polishing your staff with that smile still on your face, right? How’re we supposed to take you seriously?”

“What?! Since when have I been...”

I had apparently grabbed a cloth and started polishing my favorite weapon without realizing it.

“With how you’re acting, I bet you didn’t catch a wink of sleep last night because you were so excited, right?” Sera laughed teasingly. “What a child you are, Kelvin!”

“That’s not true. I slept like a baby.” *What’s more, I don’t want to hear that from someone who got absolutely smashed after a single cup the other day.*

“He did fall asleep thirty minutes later than usual last night. So, that was the reason why...”

“EFIL?!” My maid’s unexpected betrayal left me terribly flustered.

“Wait, you even know what time he sleeps, Efil-nee?”

“Falling asleep before one’s master is unthinkable for a servant. Managing Master’s well-being is part of my duty. This is one task that I would never leave to Ellie or Ruka.”

Efil, the way you approach your work does make me happy, but can't you let me see your sleeping face at least once in a while? No, wait, that's not the issue here.

"See, I knew it! Think about the trouble you're causing Efil!"

"Efil, we cannot have you shouldering everything by yourself. I will help you with that task!"

"But Mel-sama, you fall asleep almost at once when you get into bed..."

"I don't toss and turn in my sleep at all! Right, Alex?"

"Arf!"

"Mommy, what's Master and everyone else talking about?"

"It's a bit too soon for you, Ruka. Ignore them for now."

"I get it, I get it already! So *please* drop this subject, all right?! Let's get back to the main topic! Main! Topic!" *What the hell are you guys thinking, bringing that up first thing in the morning?!* I sighed before continuing.

"What I meant to say is, I'm thinking of using the next three days to practice my Rank S spell as much as I can. In other words, it'll be a training period."

"Hmm, training, you say. What exactly is it that you will be doing, my king?"

"The thing I'm lacking most when it comes to controlling Boreas Death Scythe is — anyone want to guess? No? — Strength!"

Among my stats, Strength was the one with the slowest growth rate. With 189 as the base number, even with the boost that I'd gained from picking up Herculean Strength (Rank B), I was still weaker than Efil, the frailest person in my party. Although my Strength stat was enough for a common adventurer to serve as a reliable vanguard, Boreas Death Scythe was Rank S, and I needed to be much stronger to properly control such a highly condensed mass of magic. Otherwise, my hand would end up wobbling when I deployed the spell, which was exactly what had happened during my fight with Clive.

"Wait, didn't you already know you'd need more Strength from the start?" Sera asked.

Gerard nodded. "You could have chosen to develop a spell more like the tornado your opponent used, couldn't you? And yet you even went to the trouble of acquiring the Scythe Mastery skill for this."

"Now there's no one who is Master's equal in mowing grass!"

Efil, that's not exactly something to brag about.

"But Kel-nii, if you'd made it a weapon-enchancing spell like your Vortex Edge or my Thunderclap Edge, it would have been useful in a lot more situations. I really can't imagine myself using a giant scythe..."

"Due to how few people have Rank S spells under their belt, there

usually isn't any other spell that can serve as a foundation for developing a new one," Melfina chimed in. "In other words, you must have come up with Boreas Death Scythe from scratch. Why did you decide to create such a spell, honey?"

I feel like I'm just getting dogpiled left and right today. I'm going to cry soon! You all want that?!

"But...scythes are cool, aren't they?! And according to my statistics, a large part of learning new spells is being able to visualize them properly. I worked my ass off developing this one, all right?!"

"When you put it that way, I think I kind of get what you mean," Rion nodded. "When I create my own spells, I also have to visualize it first. At the very least, it helps give me motivation!"

"Even in the demon world, people do not come up with new spells left and right like you two do..."

"Very well, I understand your reasoning now, honey. So, how do you intend to increase your Strength?"

"Well asked, Mel! But it isn't only Strength that I'll have to work on...for now, I'll be relying on this!" I plonked my slime buddy onto the dining table.

"Relying on...Clotho?"

"That's right! I'm borrowing its Unique Skill, Gluttony."

Gluttony was a skill that enabled the user to absorb part of another individual's stats through eating. Clotho had used it on both raw and cooked subjects so far. From my observations, the latter was much more effective. Furthermore, the stat boosts were even greater when consuming stronger targets. Put another way, Clotho wouldn't gain much of a boost from eating monsters weaker than itself.

"Oh, with Skill Eater. I see."

"That's right. My Strength is relatively low, so I'm sure there are plenty of monsters who are above me, right?" *Ugh, admitting it out loud makes me feel a bit depressed.* "Efil, what monsters are in Clotho's Storage that are Rank A or higher?"

"For Rank A ones that can be cooked and eaten, we have the three calamity rabbits hunted by Sera-sama in the Forest of Crests, one gel prince, and one blood bear. Then, I am not sure whether it is edible or not, but there is also the Rank S Gigant Lord taken down by Rion-sama."

I'm not sure I want to eat a humanoid-looking monster. Plus, I feel like doing so might give me a weird title. I'm fine with the calamity rabbit and blood bear, but for that last one...

"I think I'll pass on Gigant Lord. Is the gel prince that flabby, liquid-like monster?"

"Yes, it is."

Right. Despite its name, it was not springy like Clotho, but pure

flab. “Is it actually edible?”

“I did come across a description of how to cook it while perusing the records in Toraj Castle. It is apparently a high-class ingredient that is incredibly hard to come by.”

“I can’t even imagine what kind of dish you’d make from it.”

“Please rest assured, I have the recipe memorized.”

“Ahaha, good luck, Kel-nii.”

“Honey, make sure to leave some for me, all right?”

No, I shouldn’t doubt. I will trust Efil! I do trust Efil. I’m sure that she’ll whip up the best dish no matter what the ingredients are!



“To think it would actually be a dessert *and* that it would be finished so quickly...”

After the conversation at breakfast, Efil had ducked into the kitchen. Once we finished eating, she emerged with a platter bearing plates (enough for everyone) holding perfect square blocks of what looked like agar jelly. It was completely transparent and topped with sugar syrup.

The dish turning out so decent — no, not just decent, because it looked extremely appetizing too — certainly did surprise me. When I tasted it, I got an even bigger shock. It really *was* delicious. Absolutely delectable, in fact! The refreshing feeling of the agar jelly passing down my throat and the exquisite sweetness of the sugar syrup was a match made in heaven. *Is this really made from the body of that horrible thing?* Before I could even finish the thought, we had already cleaned off our plates.

“Thank you, Efil. After eating that, I really do feel the power building up inside. It seems my plan is working.”

I checked my Status. *Oops, I’m smiling again, aren’t I?* With the way to increase my Strength confirmed, it was time to tackle the next issue.

“Boreas Death Scythe.”

Black Staff of Disaster, my new weapon in place of the Staff of the Evil Sage Tree, was enveloped in magic that formed the shape of a scythe blade.

“Hmm...as I expected, it’s still far from perfect.”

When I looked at the blade, I could see that it was leaking magic like a faulty tap. In its current state, the spell would be dispelled after only a few swings.

“I’ve got to work on the magic consumption first. Then spell formation...reconstruction...”



I panted heavily. "This...is much more tiring than I expected."

A whole day had passed since I'd begun my training. I had spent most of that time in our underground facility, working on my Rank S spell. The only times I went back upstairs were for meals, when I had something specific to do, or when I went to catch a few hours of sleep.

At the moment, I was mainly just activating the spell over and over again, and downing MP potions whenever my magical fuel ran low. Although I was doing my best to suppress the output power, I still ended up leaving deep gouge marks on the adamantite walls even when the scythe barely made contact. As a result, the training room that I had fixed up not too long ago was all but wrecked once again. It was clear proof that I was still not in full control of my own spell.

"I think I've got the feel of it now, though. Let's give it another go."

"You sure are working hard, honey."

"Whoa! Oh, it's you, Mel."

There was my goddess companion, sitting atop some rubble and looking at me with amusement.

"C'mon, don't surprise me like that. I did ask everyone to stay out for now, didn't I? There's no telling what could happen if my hand slipped."

"At that speed? Don't worry, I can dodge it with my eyes closed."

"Ah, ouch, that's quite harsh," I laughed. It was slightly discouraging that, considering her stats, she was definitely not exaggerating or joking. *Even though her stats are supposed to be derived from mine...*

"Still, it looks like you're making good progress, honey. Your magic output is much more stable than before and you've become better at wielding it."

"I still have a long way to go. My final goal is to become good enough to use it freely without touching the walls of this room. Oh, right, were you able to make that thing I described earlier?"

"Hahaha, what a foolish question. You do realize you're talking to someone who possesses Accessory Craftsmanship at Rank S, right? I could make one for everyone so fast that breakfast wouldn't even be ready by the time I was done!"

"You say that, but I remember you oversleeping again this morning and heading straight down to stuff your face."

"Oh...well, but results are all that matters, all right?!"

"Sure, sure."

I had asked Melfina to create jewelry for the entire party. Clive, the Trycenian general I'd recently fought, had possessed a skill that allowed him to cast the Charm debuff on anyone he wanted. He hadn't used it on me, but there was a high possibility he would use it

on Efil or Sera if he could, leading to a very real need for something that could provide us all with protection.

Thankfully, the necessary materials could all be created with either Clotho's Metalicize skill or Melfina's Alchemy skill. The goddess hadn't had an opportunity to make anything since she'd been Summoned, so this seemed like a good chance to let her show off a little.

"Such a lack of appreciation, even though I spent the whole night creating equipment jam-packed with functions because I thought it would be boring to only provide protection against Charm..."

Mel pretended to cry, even going so far as to say "Boohooohoo" out loud. *Isn't that a bit too much? And what do you mean by "spent the whole night"? When I passed your room on the way to my own, you were already fast asleep! I saw you kicking your blanket off!*

"Ahem. All joking aside, there's something I want to confirm with you, honey."

"Uh, sure, okay. You getting that serious all of a sudden really throws me off my game, but...all right, what is it?"

Melfina looked straight at me, all the playfulness gone from her face. I unconsciously braced myself.

After two or three silent seconds that felt like an eternity, she slowly spoke. "About Clive, the man you fought the other day...I'll ask you once again, did he really identify himself as a transmigrator?"



While Kelvin was working hard down in the training room, Sera, Gerard, Rion, and Alex were hanging out at the Fairy's Song. Gerard was there to enjoy a pint, since it had been a while. Rion and Alex were there to meet Clare. Sera was there because she had nothing better to do.

"Ugh, I'm so bored!" the demon cried, throwing both hands up in the air.

On the other side of the counter in front of her, Clare looked up while polishing her plates and asked, "Where did that come from?"

Thankfully, there weren't many customers around at that hour, so Sera's outburst didn't draw much attention. Then again, most people who visited the Fairy Song were familiar enough with the occurrence to simply go, "Oh, Sera-san's at it again," before turning back to their own business.

"Listen to me, Clare! Kelvin won't let me be with him anymore!"

Sera-nee, I think the way you worded that sentence is going to invite a lot of misunderstandings, Rion retorted in her head as she sipped from her cup of juice at her place next to Sera.

"He's holed himself up since yesterday and won't let me in!"

“Well, that does sound worrying. Are you two in a stage of ennui?”

“Awn-wii? What’s that?”

“Mmm, I suppose you could say it’s when the relationship between a married couple grows stale and they get tired of each other.”

“What are you saying, Clare? Kelvin and I aren’t married.”

That’s not the issue here, is it? Gerard retorted in his head as he sipped his mug of hard liquor at his table in the back.

“And there’s no way I’d ever get tired of Kelvin. That’s not it. He said that he’d be training, so I offered to help him, but he turned me down because ‘it’d be too dangerous’! He wouldn’t even spar with me!”

“Oh, that’s what you meant,” Clare murmured, looking slightly disappointed.

“That’s why I’m so bored now. Isn’t there *anything* to do?” Sera wailed as she planted her face onto the counter dejectedly.

“You love fishing, don’t you? Why not do that?”

“Going fishing when Kelvin’s working so hard seems unfair.”

Isn’t aimlessly killing time here the same? Alex retorted in his head as he gnawed on a bone from his place underneath Rion’s cha—

“AH, I’VE GOT IT!” Sera suddenly leaped up from her seat, shouting so loudly that Alex reflexively pressed his ears down with his paws. “There is a way to keep myself entertained *and* help Kelvin at the same time! Gerard, Rion, Alex, let’s go!”

“Hold on a, uh, where’re we going, Sera-nee?”

“But I wanted to kick back with a drink today...”

Both the Hero and knight felt somewhat troubled by the sudden request. However, Sera had such a bright smile that neither one could find it in themselves to turn her down outright.

Since he couldn’t verbalize his refusal, an alternative plan immediately sprang into Gerard’s mind. He stood up, bottle in hand, and approached her. The alcohol percentage of what he was drinking was extremely high, making the liquid quite volatile.

Sadly, his idea fell through. Instinctively clapping a hand to her nose and taking a step back, Sera said, “Gerard, don’t even come close to me with that bottle! You’ll make me drunk from the fumes alone!”

“In that case, you should properly explain to us what it is you’re thinking of doing.”

“I’d appreciate that too, Sera-nee. At the moment, I’m not sure what’s going on.”

As Rion tried to smooth the situation over with her characteristic laugh, Sera replied, “Oh, all right then,” and proceeded to offer them the specifics.

“What I’ve thought of is, in short, harvesting food ingredients!”

“Harvesting food ingredients?”

“Harvesting food ingredients?”

“That’s right! And not just any common ingredients. I’m talking high-ranked ones that’ll make Kelvin happy!”

“So...you mean something like a blood bear?”

“Ah, I see what you’re getting at, lass. But don’t we already have a stock of Rank A ingredients back at the house? To my knowledge, that should be enough to last until at least the day after tomorrow when the ceremony takes place.”

“You’re not thinking far enough ahead. Unlike Clotho, Kelvin has a limited appetite, which means it’s the quality that’s most important, not the quantity. And even when it comes to quantity, sure, what we have in the stores should be enough...for Kelvin’s portion alone. But have you forgotten the presence of the glutton in our house? It looked like she held herself back from asking for seconds yesterday, but do you think she’ll be able to bear watching someone else eat dishes that Efil cooked with Rank A ingredients until the ceremony?”

Both Rion and Gerard were silent, unable to come up with valid objections. Although a small part of them thought, “Come on, she can’t be that bad,” they could not dismiss what Sera was saying. They knew Melfina’s passion for eating all too well.

“I...can’t say ‘no’ with much confidence...”

“Now that you mention it, Mel-nee was looking at his meal very enviously after eating her own portion last night.”

“Now we’re on the same page!”

Clare looked rather amused. “What’s this? Does that new girl really eat so much? If that’s the case, bring her here someday, I’ll let her eat as much as she wa—”

“Clare-san, please don’t do that!” Rion interrupted. “It would hurt my conscience.”

“It’s...that bad, is it? Oh, now that I think of it, she’s already come here once. She certainly did make an impression.”

“What? She did? Uh...all I can say is, I’m very sorry.”

Not long ago, Melfina had earned the shameful title of “Gluttonous Goddess.” There was no way Rion was going to let her cause anyone else any trouble.

“Partly to alleviate that fear, let’s go hunt rare monsters! We’ll be ensuring that Kelvin has enough to eat *and* it would help me to get this feeling off my chest. Two birds with one stone!” Sera exclaimed, clenching her fist in a display of enthusiasm that quickly infected Gerard and Rion and prompted them to stand up.

“When you put it that way, I can’t refuse, can I? Let’s do this. I didn’t get to do anything at the Village of Elves, after all.”

“Since it’s for Kel-nii’s sake, I’m on board too! Alex, time to go. Clare-san, here’s my payment for the meal.”

“Thanks for your patronage. Take care of yourselves out there.”

After everyone finished settling up, the group left the Fairy’s Song. Their destination: the Adventurer’s Guild.

“First order of business, let’s go gather information!”



“...and that’s why we’re looking for a dungeon filled with monsters that are ranked A or higher!”

“There is nowhere that dangerous in these parts. There are no urgent subjugation quests at the moment, either.”

Upon marching into guild headquarters in high spirits, Sera immediately spotted Villager A, Ange, and promptly went over to ask about a dungeon where high-ranked ingredients could be procured. Ange was currently in her standard work mode.

“You see, a certain party completely annihilated the Rank B dungeon, Sangria Forest, not all that long ago. To find a place even more challenging than that, you would have to cross the border into one of our neighboring countries.”

“Awww, really?!”

Sera looked extremely disappointed. In contrast, Gerard and Rion didn’t seem the least bit surprised. After all, the moment a single Rank A monster showed up in Parth’s vicinity, Kelvin would be notified of an emergency quest. No such news had reached them lately, so visiting the guild in person was hardly going to make a difference.

“In that case, I suppose we’ll have to go abroad, then. If we don’t stop to rest, we can reach somewhere about the same distance as the Forest of Crests in half a day, making a round trip one full day. Adding in time for exploration...”

The former demon princess had already shifted gears to thinking up Plan B. Clearly, giving up on her idea was not an option.

As she muttered furiously to herself, Rion took the time to look around the guild. “It’s pretty busy today, isn’t it?”

Although the place was normally bustling, what with it being the hub for all adventurers in the city, it seemed to be even more alive than ever. In the room behind the counters, Rion spied the figures of guild staff with bottles of smelling salts on hand tackling piles of paper. There were also more receptionists than usual, handling a large number of adventurers who were lining up to consign items. Ange seemed somewhat exhausted herself.

“Everyone on the staff roster is being mobilized to prepare for Kelvin-san’s upcoming Rank S promotion. On the day of the ceremony, the streets will be enveloped with revelry, and important

VIPs from various countries, not to mention famed adventurers, will be visiting to catch a glimpse of the new Rank S member. Guildmaster Rio is also rushing around in a flurry. We're delegating a lot of the physical work and the gathering of things to the adventurers by issuing them as quests."

"Really? Nobody told us."

"Kelvin-san, and all of you by extension, are the guests of honor. How can we ask you to help with the setup? Furthermore, we've made it so that those who complete more of our tasks get priority seating for the practice match. Considering how rare it is to see two Rank S adventurers duke it out, everyone is being quite competitive about completing their quests. Oh, there will be special seats prepared separately for you and your party, Rion-san, so don't worry about that."

"Yay, thank you! Has the Rank S adventurer Kel-nii will be fighting arrived already?"

Ange flipped through some documents on her table. "Umm...looks like she's scheduled to get here tomorrow. Her name is —"

BAM!

Ange's words were interrupted by the door of the building being thrown open with almost enough force to tear it off its hinges. A party of adventurers pushed their way inside in a panic. Some of them collapsed on the spot as others drew deep, ragged breaths, making it clear that they had pushed themselves to get there fast.

"I-It's terrible!" huffed the man who was likely their leader. His mithril equipment identified him as a Rank C adventurer.

"Whoa, what's with the frenzy? Catch your breath first, man," said someone nearby.

"It's a dungeon! Some monster's tunneled a huge path that opened up a whole new dungeon!"

"Seriously?!"

The unexpected news plunged the guild into chaos. The dungeon being a new discovery meant that no one had explored it yet and that it was entirely untouched. The absolute absence of information made it an especially dangerous place, but in exchange, it was also an opportunity to make a quick killing by sweeping up the rare items and treasures that lay within. It was only natural that the adventurers would become extremely agitated.

"That's definitely a big deal! Hey, man, where is this new dungeon?"

"Forget it, man. That place isn't somewhere any of us can handle —"

"You say that, but I bet you're thinking of getting a head start on the rest of us and stealing everything for yourself, aren't you?!"

“That’s not what I’m saying! Listen to me —”

The man who had made the announcement was inundated by questions from those around him. Everyone was eager to be the first to clear the new danger zone.

“Guys, please calm down! Let’s listen to what Heath-san has to say!” Ange shouted from her position between the man and the others after having somehow made her way there without anyone noticing.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Heath said, “Thank you for saving me, Ange-chan.”

“Don’t worry about it. And remember, everyone: if you go to explore this new dungeon right now, you likely won’t make it back for the practice match the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten. Sorry.”

Ange was relieved to see the crowd calming back down. However, her duties as guild staff were only just beginning. She would have to extract as much information as possible regarding the new dungeon to determine exactly how dangerous it was. In light of how much work she already had, she felt the urge to clutch her head and scream. But doing so wouldn’t change the fact that this wasn’t an issue that could be put off, as it could end up affecting the upcoming festivities.

Unfortunately, Rio was out for the day to make arrangements for the ceremony, which meant the staff who were present had to deal with it themselves.

“Heath-san, would you mind telling us what you know about this place?”

“It’s located inside the Rank C dungeon to the east, Clayworm Passages. We were exploring the place as usual when we spotted a giant mole digging a hole. We followed it and defeated it; that part was fine. But the tunnel it had dug just before we killed it opened up into a huge cavern where we spotted ancient-looking buildings and a monster we’ve never seen before! Moi, from my party, possesses Analyze Eye, but the moment he tried to use it on that thing, he fainted. My Danger Detection was going off like crazy too, so we retreated before we were noticed.”

“Sorry for letting you down, Heath.”

“Please, if I hadn’t carried you on my back and gotten out of there ASAP, we would both be dead meat by now. So, Moi woke up sometime on our way back to Parth. From what he told me about the creature’s Status, there’s no doubt it’s Rank A.”

“Rank A?!” exclaimed many of those present.

Up until then, the most dangerous dungeon in Parth’s vicinity had been Rank B. Alarm rippled through adventurers and staff alike.

“A dungeon within a dungeon...this is extremely dangerous and needs to be announced immediately. There might be other

adventurers still inside Clayworm Passages.”

“But none of us can handle a Rank A monster. Even approaching this place to fill in the hole sounds extremely dangerous.”

“In that case...there’s no choice, let’s issue Kelvin-san an emergency quest.”

The staff all nodded in agreement at Ange’s suggestion. None of the adventurers had any objections either.

“So...where in the east is this new dungeon?”

“Were you not listening to what Ange-chan said? This is a job that only Kelvin-san, the strongest adventurer in Parth, can handle —” Heath replied in a vexed voice, turning around only to stop short.

There stood a jubilant Sera, her arms crossed and her chin tilted up as if to say, “Go on, I’m listening.” A hulking knight and a cute girl could be seen standing behind her.

“Sera-san?! And Gerard-dono and Rion-chan too?!”

“Kelvin’s at home right now, but he’s busy. As members of his party, we’ll go in his stead to explore this dungeon for you! After all, we’re guaranteed good seats even if we don’t help with any of the preparations. Go on, give us all the information you know!”

The girl’s overbearing presence left Heath feeling slightly bewildered. He turned to look at Ange.

“Hm, if it’s those three, I’m sure they’ll be able to handle it without a problem. Since the guildmaster is currently absent, we’ll issue the emergency quest ourselves. You sure about taking this on, Sera-san?”

“Leave it to us! We’ll clear it today!”

“Ahaha, that does sound reassuring.”

So, Sera-nee did hear about our seats, Rion thought wryly.

As Heath shared everything he knew with them, the rest of the adventurers scattered to return to what they had each been doing. The tension that had been so palpable just moments before had completely dissipated, the hustle and bustle returning to normal in short order.

After all, everyone present was thinking the same thing: *If Sera-san and the rest are on the job then there’s nothing to worry about.*

“...and that’s all we got,” Heath eventually concluded. “Is it enough?”

“As long as we know the location, we’ll make do,” Sera replied, accepting the hand-drawn map and checking the time. “Our target is the boss monster. The other Rank S adventurer arrives tomorrow, so let’s hurry, you two! We’ll get back in time for dinner and surprise Kelvin!”

“Sera, lass, let’s not forget to lend a hand if we encounter other adventurers inside.”

::Gramps, is it just me or are things proceeding in a way that’s

weirdly convenient for Sera-nee?::

::Her Luck stat is already higher than that of the Heroes. In a way, I suppose this was inevitable.::

“Come on, guys, let’s get going!” Sera called over her shoulder, seeming ready to take off then and there.

“Sera-nee, we’re still in our casual wear! We’ll have to at least return to the house to get changed first!”



Sera and Rion quickly made their way back home to don their adventuring gear and throw their weapons into Clotho’s Storage. After confirming through the Network that Kelvin was still down in the training room, they hurried back out before anyone noticed. Along the way, Sera made sure to leave word with Efil, who was in the middle of hanging up laundry outside.

“Efil, get fired up for tonight’s dinner!”

“I’m sorry? Um, of course...”

Paying no attention to the maid’s puzzled tilt of her head, Sera rushed off at top speed.

“I wonder what has happened?”

Shrugging it off, Efil returned to the task at hand, her mind already on a “fired up” menu for that evening’s dinner.



After meeting back up with Gerard in town, the group set out for Clayworm Passages. The dungeon was a bit of a distance from Parth, but for those three, it barely took ten minutes on foot.

They soon found themselves facing a cave opening roughly three meters in height that did look like a tunnel burrowed by a gigantic monster. The sunlight didn’t penetrate the darkness too far, but there were torches set up at intervals inside. Strangely enough, the torches did not appear to be burning down.

“We’re here! That was an acceptable travel time, I suppose,” Sera said, casting an eye over the torches. “Hm, I feel a bit of magic coming from these.”

“They might be magic items, then,” Rion replied. “My guess would be that adventurers have been topping them up with magic as they pass by. It doesn’t seem like I’ll need to cast Lambent.”

Gerard looked around. “Nothing seems out of place here, at least.”

Sera activated her various detection skills and confirmed that there was indeed nothing of note around the cave opening. However, a very strong presence lay farther inside.

“This...doesn’t seem like a mere Rank A monster. It might even be

Rank S!"

"Yay! Jackpot, Sera-nee!"

"I feel myself suddenly filled with motivation upon hearing such news. Let's brace ourselves and do this!"

With Gerard taking point, Sera, Alex, and Rion followed close behind. The idea was that Gerard was in charge of pushing forward and taking on anything that appeared from the front while Sera would warn the others about any surprise attacks or traps.

The passage continued flat and straight for a while, but started sloping downwards after a while. From there, numerous side passages began appearing on both sides, turning the place into a true labyrinth.

"This way!"

Sera was choosing their turns based on the presence she was sensing. She had yet to make a wrong call, as evidenced by the fact that they were steadily drawing closer to their goal. It was slightly worrying that the presence didn't seem to be moving at all, almost as if it were lying in wait for someone or something.

"Gerard, a monster will be jumping up from the ground five steps forward."

"Understood."

When Gerard reached the spot Sera had mentioned, a clayworm did indeed leap out to assault him. He inhaled lightly and bisected the beast the instant it appeared.

Oh well, there's no point overthinking it. I'm sure everything will be clear once we see this thing in person, Sera thought as she backhanded another clayworm closing in from overhead without even turning to look.



"Well, this is rather unexpected," Sera murmured.

At the moment, she and the others were looking down a straight path. Some distance away was a side passage that was likely the tunnel dug by the giant mole Heath had described. In front of the entrance, however, stood a large figure that wavered in the light of the flickering torches.

Sera focused her senses on it while pressing her back against the wall at an angle just out of sight. "Whatever it is, it feels even stronger than me! We really did get lucky!"

"Interesting. If my king was here, he would be absolutely delighted."

"Focus, Sera-nee, Gramps. I do agree Kel-nii would have been really happy about this, though."

In spite of what she was saying, Rion's face was flushed with excitement and her heart was beating faster than usual. Perhaps she

had caught a bit of her beloved brother's nature as a battle junkie.

At that moment, there was movement. The part of the figure that seemed likely to be its head turned towards where the group was hiding.

"It's noticed us!" Sera whispered.

"There isn't much room in the passage. I'll go first! Support me!"

Gerard proceeded, holding Dreadnought at the ready to protect the two behind him.

"Hold on, Gramps! Isn't that a human?!"

"What?!"

A closer look at the figure did indeed reveal it to be humanoid. As the party member in the lead, Gerard identified their opponent as a large man with muscles that seemed on the verge of bursting out through the tight pink dress he was wearing. His height was about the same as Gerard's, and his blond hair was done up in fancy ringlet pigtails. Gerard's brain struggled to process what his eyes were seeing.



“It is...a man, I think?”

“Is he cross-dressing?”

The monster, if it really was that, suddenly adopted a crouch start position. “You guys...” rumbled a hoarse, manly voice adopting a very feminine manner of speech, “this place...is dangerous!!”

The mass of muscle abruptly pushed off with perfect form and sprinted forward at top speed. With every step he took, the ground was gouged out beneath his feet and the dungeon shook, causing little showers of dust to fall. The pressure of the incoming charge and the strangeness of what he was seeing caused a cold sweat to break out on Gerard’s brow.

What’s dangerous is your appearance! thought the knight as he braced himself for impact. The muscle monster was nearly on top of him in the blink of an eye.

::It’s likely a human, but what should I do?! I can slice it, right?!::

::We’re under assault here, so it’s legitimate self-defense either way! I’ll provide support!::

::Alex, into the shadows!::

After the instantaneous strategy meeting through the Network, everyone leaped into action without missing a beat. Sera and Rion began chanting spells as Alex dove into Gerard’s shadow, ready to spring back out any time.

In contrast, the large man dropped lower and lower while maintaining his speed. Several steps before crashing into Gerard’s heavy shield, he started spinning.

He’s unarmed, which means he fights using the Combat Technique skill, right? Interesting! Gerard immediately activated Mind’s Eye in expectation of a kick that would utilize the added force of the spinning. He was ready to see through the attack, no matter what form it might take, and parry it. His intention was to get a Shield Bash in.

However, what Gerard saw in seemingly slow motion was not an attack.

BRRRR!

The passage of the man’s muscular legs were leaving deep tracks in the ground and kicking up one huge cloud of dust. Without ever shifting into an actual attack, he came to a stop just before reaching Gerard, buried in the ground up to his knees.

He used his own legs as brakes to stop just in time? thought Rion, trying to figure out what she had just witnessed.

The man slowly stood up, his feet still buried in the earth. Alex poked his head out of the shadows, ready to lunge forward in attack.

Under the bewildered gazes of everyone present, the man’s thick

lips slowly parted. “My goodness, I *told* you guys that it’s dangerous here, didn’t I?! Why are you just *standing* there?!” he asked in a huff as he wriggled his body in a feminine manner.



Long story short, the man was *not* a monster. As it turned out, he was actually a normal human being.

“Dearie me, I’m so, so sorry for surprising you cutie pies. I had completely assumed that you were adventurers who had gotten lost down here. That was quite the disrespectful thing to do to Rank A adventurers, wasn’t it?”

Rion shook her head. “No, no, it was our fault for jumping to conclusions, umm...”

“Oh, silly me, forgetting to introduce myself. My name is Goldiana Prettiana, a Rank S adventurer. I also go by Peach Ogre, if you’ve heard of me. Feel free to call me Prettia-chan!” Goldiana replied, adopting a pose commonly taken by idols in magazines.

It’s my first time meeting a gay man. What’s more, he’s a Rank S adventurer too. Is he the one Kel-nii will be fighting? Rion wondered rather calmly.

In contrast, Gerard, who had never heard of someone like this in his life, found himself feeling rather apprehensive. *Wh-What a distinctive character he is...*

“Does the fact that you have a last name mean you’re a noble, Prettia-chan?” Rion asked curiously.

“Oh my, you don’t know? Rank S adventurers are allowed to take on a last name. I actually come from a commoner family.”

“So, what’re you doing here, Goldiana?” asked Sera, completely unfazed.

“I’m sure even you guys have heard of a new Rank S adventurer being born in Parth soon, right? I’ve heard through the grapevine that this Kelvin-chan is a younger man. I *never* fail to miss an opportunity to check out wonderful younger guys, nuh-uh!”

Goldiana let out an excited little scream and daintily kicked up a foot behind him. Gerard was nearing his limits, his face actually turning pale.

“I was on my way to Parth for the ceremony, but would you believe it, my sixth sense picked up on a strange feeling coming from this dungeon. So I came to take a look, and my oh my, what did I find but a whole mob of Rank A monsters on the other side of this hole! I couldn’t let them out in case they went after the other darlings still down here, so I was just standing guard until the guild took action.”

“You’re a nice person, Goldiana! Even so, Kelvin is off-limits, all right?”

“Oh my, do you dearies know Kelvin-chan personally?”

“Oh, right, we haven’t introduced ourselves,” Sera said before quickly doing just that. The other two followed suit, with Alex remaining hidden in Gerard’s shadow from the neck down.

“My goodness, so Kelvin-chan is Rion-chan’s big brother? Now I’m *really* getting my hopes up!” Goldiana exclaimed as he took a long look at the young girl’s face. Clearly, his mental image of Kelvin was now taking on a cute and feminine visage.

“Ahahaha...” Rion laughed weakly, thinking, *Of course, we aren’t related by blood, so...*

“As I said, Kelvin is off-limits!”

“And Sera-chan is so pretty that even *I* might get jealous,” the muscle man complimented her. “Ah, could it be that Kelvin-chan is your boyfriend?”

“H-He’s not! But still, he’s off-limits!”

“Aha! I see how it is. If you ever want help in that department, come straight to me, all right, Sera-chan? I’ll be rooting for you, so go for it!”

Goldiana lightly patted Sera’s shoulder. The demon didn’t even notice his approach until she felt his hand, perhaps because of how flustered she was by the exchange.

“As a consolation, I think I’ll be claiming this fine gentleman here!”

“Uh...what?”

“Oh, yes, you look like one tough, strong man!”

Gerard suddenly found Goldiana’s thick, burly arms wrapped around his own shoulders.



After some discussion, it was decided that Goldiana would be joining Sera and the others in exploring the new dungeon. Although it was a place filled with Rank A monsters that they had no information at all on, the idea was that the addition of a Rank S adventurer would provide them with enough fighting strength to handle whatever they might encounter.

When Goldiana had been standing sentry on his own, he’d had no choice but to remain at the tunnel entrance, but things were different now that he had a whole group with him. Someone else could be the lookout if needed, or they could use magic to temporarily block the passageway.

Before deciding what to do, the group agreed to quickly scout out the far end of the tunnel. There were no more torches from that point on, so Rion had to cast *Lambent* to illuminate the way.

“Still, what a terrible pity it is...to think the nice gentleman is

actually an armor-type monster. Even *I* have no chance when there's no body or face to see."

"I'm afraid that's just how it is, yes."

Although Gerard's armor was indeed hollow, he could, in fact, materialize a body if he wanted to. But he purposely chose not to mention that part. His instincts told him that he should absolutely keep that tidbit to himself.

::Sera, Rion, Alex, never, ever tell him!::

::We know, we know::

::Ahaha::

::Arf!::

He made sure to press the matter home with his companions — that was how desperate he felt.

"So...*are* you Kel-nii's opponent for the practice match, Prettia-chan? He's supposed to fight a Rank S adventurer, isn't he?" Rion asked in an attempt to change the subject. Her consideration left Gerard feeling a little warm inside.

"Oh, I'd love to, dearie, but I'm afraid not. His opponent is Sylvia-chan, who was promoted last year and goes by the alias 'Ice Princess.' It's tradition to fight the last person to receive a promotion. Which reminds me, that girl actually skipped her own promotion ceremony and practice match, so it's going to be my first time seeing her in action too."

"She was promoted even though she skipped everything?"

"Mhm, we adventurers do love our freedom and the guild is practically run by retired adventurers. Technically, even the ceremony isn't compulsory."

Sera, who was walking behind Gerard, turned towards Goldiana, asking, "I've been wondering for a while now, but what's with 'Peach Ogre' and 'Ice Princess'?"

"Do you mean our aliases? When an adventurer reaches Rank S, they are assigned a special name by the guild as a mark of awe and respect. Isn't it wonderful?"

"That...sounds sort of unnecessary."

"Of course it's necessary, dear!"

"Of course it's necessary!"

Goldiana and Rion had answered at the same time.

"Don't underestimate aliases, Sera-nee! They're absolutely essential!"

"Rion-chan is quite right. Listen carefully, Sera-chan. 'Rank S adventurer' is a title that represents *the* most prominent people in the world in terms of fighting power. Aliases are useful in accurately spreading information regarding each member of this very limited circle. It's a bit embarrassing to say this about myself, but I'm

confident that I'm strong enough to wipe out the entire army of a small country all by myself. Whether Kelvin-chan is aware of his own potential, I have no idea. But this is precisely why no country dares to touch Rank S adventurers or the Adventurer's Guild itself. It just wouldn't be worth it, after all. So the most they do is solicit us."

"Yep, yep! And it's when someone has an alias that you think, 'Uh-oh, I better not mess with that guy!' I so want one myself!"

"I see now. I suppose that makes sense."

Goldiana's explanation centered around the idea that aliases serve as a stark warning to governments and other institutions, but Rion's insistence was based merely on the opinion that aliases sounded cool. As a fourteen-year-old — the age of a middle school second year student — such nicknames held an immeasurable allure for her.

"Awww, you sure catch on fast despite being so young, Rion-chan! But don't worry, when Kelvin-chan is successfully promoted to Rank S, the members of his party — if they're strong enough, of course — might receive aliases too!"

"Really?! I can't wait!"

"If you ever find yourself troubled by anything related to being an adventurer, come find me! I'll give you all the help you need!"

The odd pair exchanged a firm handshake, with Goldiana having to hunch over quite a bit due to the difference in height. Based on this exchange, as well as the matter with Sera earlier, it was clear that this new acquaintance of theirs was quite the good Samaritan.

"All right, everyone, it's about time to wrap up the small talk," Gerard warned. "We'll reach the end of the tunnel soon."



The exit opened up to a cavern big enough to hold an entire town. Gerard, who was at the front of the procession, took a peek inside.

Hmm, there are lights ahead. From where he was hiding in the shadow of the tunnel opening, the knight could already see numerous humanoid monsters milling about. He shared the information with his party members by adding markers on the map they had joint access to through the Network, then verbally gave Goldiana a cursory rundown.

"Let's clear out the cavern first," Sera suggested. "We can spread out to crush the monsters one-on-one then regroup here."

Gerard nodded and turned to the others. "Everyone ready?"

"Anytime," Goldiana replied.

Rion and Alex responded with "Roger!" and "Arf!" respectively, without further ado, the group scattered out across the cavern, with Sera cutting straight through the center.

The floor was paved with stone tiles and the ceiling was so high that one could easily forget they were underground. Obviously, the

space was man-made. The most conspicuous sight, however, was farther on.

Numerous crumbling buildings...and an altar in the back?

There might have been a treasure chest or two hidden within the decaying buildings, but what drew Sera's attention most was an altar-like structure in the distance. Within the cavern, it was the only thing that appeared to be perfectly intact and unmarred by time. Strangely enough, it was emanating magical waves imbued with the holy element.

But it's still quite far away. Let's focus on clearing out the monsters first, like we decided!

Three moving steel puppets noticed Sera swiftly running their way and made an attempt to stop her. Blades emerged from within their arms as they approached her from the side, zigzagging with unpredictable steps.

Easily dodging the first arm-blade swing, Sera enveloped her fists with dual casts of Armor Corrosion, a spell that lowered the target's Endurance, and planted them squarely in the creature's abdomen.

A scream of tearing metal filled the cavern as the puppet's midsection was nearly pulverized, but it somehow managed to stay upright. In fact, it lifted both arms as if intending to go for a counterattack. But Sera swung her invisible tail in a horizontal blow that successfully reduced the automaton to scraps.

Would Kelvin be able to eat these puppets? Well, I'm sure Efil will find a way. Let's retrieve them just in case.

The two remaining monsters were also dispatched in short order, with the broken pieces being summarily thrown into Clotho's Storage.

"Doki Doki Smash!" Goldiana roared loudly in a manly voice that carried across the cavern. His fists, which were enveloped in a red aura, pierced the puppets with each punch and gouged holes into them the size of his biceps. What was left by the time he was done was unfit for any repurposing.

"That's a pretty interesting technique you're using, Goldiana! And it's incredibly powerful too!"

"Oh my, you can tell? I've adopted a certain school of martial arts from the Western Continent and put my own spin on it. And your fighting style is quite interesting too, with all that magic around your fists. Color me impressed indeed. Although I'm not quite sure what you did with that last attack."

"It's a trade secret." Goldiana giggled. "Women with lots of secrets do have a special allure."

From the information coming through the Network, Sera confirmed that the others were doing equally well. According to her various detection skills, there were roughly fifty monsters in the area.

At this rate, everyone would finish and regroup within ten minutes.

::Sera-nee, what do you think about ‘Black-Clad Hero’? Is it too generic?::

::Uh...focus on the fight for now. I probably don’t need to say it, but look out for Rion, all right, Alex?::

::Arf!::

Despite only being able to bark, Alex’s meaning of “Don’t worry, I got it!” was loud and clear.

“Goodness, Rion’s still such a child sometimes,” Sera muttered with the slightest of smiles.



“Hmph!”

Sera’s powerful strike crushed the head of the last remaining puppet. It had barely been seven minutes and the curtain had already fallen on their battle with the monsters that roamed the cavern.

“They all looked the same, but each attacked in different ways, with some using blades, some spewing fire, and some shooting out a ton of tiny balls. It was so weird! But having a variety of ingredients is a good thing, so, oh well!”

Clearly, Sera fully intended to have Kelvin eat the remains of these bizarre creatures. Gerard, who happened to run into her on his way back, had a wry expression.

“Sera, lass, these things cannot be eaten by anyone other than Clotho.”

“Efil will manage somehow! For sure!”

“It’s just outright impossible.”

“Whaaat...” Her shoulders drooped with disappointment at the realization that the Rank A monsters she had worked so hard to retrieve were unfit for human consumption.

“It’s great that you have faith in her, but even Efil has her limits. Rather than eating them, these parts would better serve the golem modifications that you like working on with my king.”

The demon perked right back up, her spirits fully recovered. “That sounds great too!”

“Oh my, you even know how to make golems, Sera-chan?” Goldiana asked, looking none the worse for wear.

“They’re not *my* golems; they’re Kelvin’s. Tinkering with them is one of his hobbies.”

“I see, so that means Kelvin-chan uses Green Magic. My oh my, now I simply cannot wait to see tomorrow’s match!”

“Doesn’t matter. Kelvin’s so strong he’ll win hands down!” Sera replied, chortling proudly and throwing out her chest.

Does this count as her bragging about the guy she likes? Goldiana

wondered. *She doesn't seem terribly self-aware.*

"You're so slow, everyone!"

"Arf!"

Rion and Alex were already waiting at the tunnel entrance where they had agreed to regroup.

"You two sure are fast! Good job!" Gerard said in praise.

"Aww, that's because everyone was busy talking..." Rion replied, looking slightly embarrassed by the compliment. "So, since we've finished clearing the monsters in the cavern, are we going to head deeper inside?"

"There's an altar on the far side," Sera mentioned. "We should definitely go check it out."

"In that case, we need to decide what to do about this tunnel," said Gerard.

Rion tilted her head. "Should one of us stay behind as a lookout?"

"That's a pass for me," Sera scoffed with a flick of her hand.

"Can't we just make a wall to cover it up?"

"That would be easy if Kel-nii were here, but none of us have spells that can do that."

To the others' surprise, Goldiana raised his hand. "Leave it to me! All you dearies stand back a little, all right?"

He walked over to the closest ruined building, spread his arms as if to hug it, then...

"HNNNNGGGG!"

With a grunt, he started pushing the entire structure. The ground shook as the gigantic wall moved, slowly but surely. Bricks fell left and right, which wasn't surprising given the shabby state of the place, some of them even landing on Goldiana's head, but he took no notice.

The teenager's mind was filled with a blank sense of "Whaaat..." whereas the demon looked rather impressed, thinking to herself, "Aha! An outside-the-box approach!"

With everyone experiencing widely differing reactions to the sight, the tunnel entrance was soon sealed by the enormous wall.

Goldiana nodded in satisfaction. "That should earn us enough time. Come on, off to the altar we go!"



The group made their way past the broken-down buildings scattered all throughout the cavern, heading for the deepest part. At a certain point, the ruins cut off abruptly and were replaced by magnificently ornamented pillars positioned at regular intervals along a central path.

"Everything about that altar seems shady," Sera commented.

"The road here also looks fancier than the paving in the cavern. Is

this an active place for worshipping someone or something?" Rion mused, looking around curiously.

Goldiana nodded. "That could be. Stay sharp, dearies."

After proceeding down the deceptively long path, they finally reached the altar. It was indeed the structure that Sera had spotted from a distance, but its size was much larger than expected. It was almost as tall as Kelvin's mansion, without so much as a spot of weathering on its pristine white surface. Its appearance offered a stark contrast to the other buildings seen so far.

"That's quite the monument," Gerard remarked. "Why on earth is something like this hidden underground?"

Rion gingerly laid a hand on the surface. It was cold, as if made of stone. "Hmm...nothing's happening."

"We've come all this way for nothing?! What about the boss monster?!" Sera cried.

Goldiana tried to put a positive spin on things. "Calm down, Sera-chan. The sad truth is, things don't always turn out the way you want when adventuring. We've cleared almost all the Rank A monsters here, and that's a good day's work if you ask me. We can also check out the buildings back there for treasure chests if you want something to take home."

"But we didn't find a single ingredient for Kelvin's meals..." Sera sighed as she leaned back against the altar.

"Sera-nee, cheer u— huh?"

As Rion tried to console her friend, she sensed something. So did Sera, as evidenced by her head suddenly jerking up.

"Sera-nee, get away from the altar!"

"No need to tell me!"

Everyone immediately leaped back to a safe distance so that they could ascertain what had happened.

"The altar..."

"It's glowing!"

The structure that had been completely unresponsive a moment before was now glowing with a dazzling white light. In almost no time, that light enveloped the entire room, blinding everyone present.

::Sera, lass, remember your detection skills!::

::I'm already using them! There's some living thing where the altar used to be! Stay sharp!::

::Uh-oh, my Danger Detection is off the charts!::

A roar filled the air, quite different from Alex's familiar howl. Despite clearly being the voice of a beast, the sound seemed somehow filled with majesty and carried a surge of holy energy. As if in response to the outcry, the light surrounding them abruptly disappeared.

“Goodness me, what do we have here?” Goldiana murmured as a drop of sweat trickled down his face.

The distinctive altar had vanished, replaced by a monster of the same height with fur that was as white as the stone had been. It had the appearance of a giant wolf, but Sera sensed something about it that she couldn’t quite put to words.

“Jin Scrimmage!”

The moment the wolf fell silent, Sera activated her trump card. It was not a partial activation like the ones she used while sparring with Melfina. Black magic enveloped not only her arms and legs, but even her wings, tail, and finally, head. When she was done, her form had become that of a classically terrifying demon of lore.

“Thunderclap Edge!”

“Agito Renga!”

Late by only a fraction of a second, Rion and Gerard leaped into motion as well. Lightning flashed around Demon Sword Caladbolg, and three consecutive slashes flew out from Demon Sword Dainsleif.

“Grrr...” the white wolf rumbled, indicating that it was aware of the attack. It shifted into a battle stance as the hair on its body stood on end.

With Agito Renga serving as the starting signal, Rion and Goldiana dashed to the left and right, and Sera launched herself upwards. At the moment, the wolf’s eyes were on Gerard.

No, that’s not it. The creature’s eyes are following Agito!

A white paw swooshed through the air as if taking a practice swing. That was all it did, yet that lazy movement generated an incredibly powerful shockwave that completely changed the trajectory of the flying slashes.

“What?!” Gerard cried in disbelief.

One of the slashes came flying back towards him and the remaining two were redirected towards Goldiana, prompting a slightly indignant “Not cool!” from the muscle man. The wolf had not only deflected the attack, but had even appropriated the flying slashes for its counterattack.

::But it’s left itself open!::

Thanks to the Rank A Red Magic spell Lightning Enhancement boosting her Agility and reflexes, Rion had managed to close in on the beast. In her right hand was Demon Sword Caladbolg with Thunderclap Edge applied: a combination capable of scorching flesh, obstructing healing, and penetrating any and all defenses. Its effectiveness had already been proven during the recent fight against Gigant Lord.

In her left hand was Faux Holy Sword Will, an imitation of Touya’s sword forged by Kelvin that, despite not having the

shapeshifting capabilities of the real thing, boasted a cutting edge that was in no way inferior.

Caladbolg and Will both slashed through the monster's abdomen. However, the instant the former made contact, she felt the energy being sucked right out of the blade.

"What—?!"

A wave of foreboding prompted Rion to quickly back off, using Sky Walk to cut a wild path through the air so as to avoid a counterattack. Given how skillful she was, she even managed to land another hit with Faux Holy Sword Will as she made her retreat.

::Caladbolg's electrification has been weakened. Could this beast have the power to absorb magic like Clotho does?::

Zippering around at lightning speed, Rion confirmed the state of the wolf's abdomen. Although the size of the beast made the wound look insignificant, it was a proper gash, and blood was indeed dripping out.

::Slashes with a sword are effective! Not so sure about magi—what now?!::

The wolf hadn't stopped at absorbing Thunderclap Edge. Electrical sparks began flashing between the strands of its fluffed-up fur, rapidly growing in intensity.

"ROOOOAAARRRR!"

The monster howled, unleashing the electricity it had collected as an area-of-effect attack that rushed at Sera and the others with a blinding flash and an ear-splitting boom. The blast grazed the edge of Rion's outfit, but she managed to get away otherwise unscathed.

::Phew, that was scary! If I had been any slower, I'd be charcoal now!::

::Are you okay, Rion?!::

::Don't worry, Sera-nee, it didn't actually hit me. But it'll be hard to get close now...::

Bluish-white electric currents crackled furiously over the wolf's body. The previous attack made it clear that getting too close would likely be a fatal mistake.

::Refrain from using lightning-based spells for now! I'll test the waters a bit more first!::

The pair of gauntlets that Sera was wearing — Arondight — were capable of transforming whenever she used Jin Scrimmage on her arms. One unique aspect of the gloves was that the more familiar the late Viktor — whose carapace had been used to create the equipment — had been with the spell or technique Sera used, the more powerful the gauntlets' boost would be. At the moment, they perfectly complemented the vicious-looking claws on both of her arms.

This white wolf might be even stronger than me, but with Jin Scrimmage applied to my whole body, I should be able to manage! From

her position high in the air, Sera suddenly plunged downwards.

The wolf noticed her rapid approach.

“Gloom Lance!”

An ominous-looking black spear appeared above her right arm and shot forward at an incredible speed. The Hero Miyabi had used that same spell when she’d fought Kelvin, but the destructive power and speed of Sera’s cast was on a whole other level.

With an eye on the incoming projectiles, the wolf crouched slightly, then abruptly disappeared from view.

It dis—

::Sera-nee, behind you!::

Rion’s warning came at the same moment Sera felt her Danger Detection skill reacting. She whirled around to see the wolf’s gaping maw, fangs bared. It had managed to circle around to her back with an unbelievable nimbleness that seemed disproportionate to its gigantic form.

I’ll use Sky Walk to — oh no!

Sera spread her wings and tried to take evasive maneuvers. But she was late by a beat and the wolf’s teeth seemed about to make contact.

“Don’t you...”

“Even think about it!”

Dainsleif slammed down onto the wolf’s head at the exact same moment Goldiana’s red fist exploded upwards in a strike that landed squarely on the monster’s lower jaw. Due to this combined attack from her fierce companions, the mouth that would have closed on Sera was forcibly slammed shut before it could reach her.

However, the electricity enveloping the beast was still in full force. Both men suffered damage at the moment of impact through their sword and fist, respectively.

“Owie!”

“Ugh...but no matter. Dainsleif!”

Demon Sword Dainsleif began to break down the electric current into magic and absorb it. Although the sword had been in contact with the monster for only a brief moment, the coat of crackling electricity was noticeably weaker than before. This was a feat that had been possible only thanks to the incredible toughness of the two men.

“Rahhh!”

Sera’s fist, packed with all the strength she could muster and wreathed in the Quagmire Boots spell, landed directly in the monster’s face, sending its huge bulk back towards the ground at an impressive speed. Due also in part to the added strength from Jin Scrimmage, the beast continued to slide for a while longer even after crashing into the floor of the cavern, sending up a huge cloud of dust.

Gerard and Goldiana landed on nearby footholds. Both of them had taken damage, but not enough to be concerning.

“Sorry and thanks, you two!”

“Looks like I was right to stay back and wait for an opening. Ugh...”

“I’m just glad my sixth sense activated in time. Dearie, you really shouldn’t let down your guard like that, all right? And I did feel a bit of feedback just now, but I don’t think we actually did much damage.”

“Mm, I’ll be more careful. But I picked up a clue from that encounter. This thing went to the trouble of dodging my Gloom Lances.”

Sera switched over to the Network to continue. ::Rion, it should be susceptible to damage from other elements. Use flame spells when providing support.::

::I’m not that good with flames, but...okay!::

Crackle, crackle, crackle!

From within the cloud of dust that had yet to dissipate, bluish-white flashes of electricity were once again visible.

::Ahaha, looks like it *can* generate its own electricity.::

::I’d guessed as much. It’s way above me in speed, but I hit it with Quagmire Boots just now. That should slow it down some.::

When the dust settled, the form of the white wolf was revealed, with blood trickling down its forehead, its previously pristine coat marred with red. It was snarling and in a very foul mood indeed.

Crackle.

The electricity emanating from its body began to separate. Soon enough, it was surrounded by innumerable tiny balls of electricity floating in the air.

“Be careful, dearies! It’s about to do something new!”

With sharp *whooshes*, the wolf’s tail began to bat the balls indiscriminately.

“Flame Rampart!” Rion, who had been closest, promptly erected a barrier of flames in front of her. As soon as the balls of electricity made contact, they stopped and expanded to swallow the entire wall.

Rion retreated to where Sera and the others were.

::Hmm, so that’s what happens when something touches those little orbs?::

::Gerard, stop commentating and help us evade them!::

Rion and Sera used their spells, Gerard generated his flying slashes, and Goldiana picked up nearby stones and threw them, all with the aim of setting off as many of the lightning balls as possible while they were still in the air.

Naturally, the white wolf did not sit back to watch.

“Here it comes!” Goldiana warned.

The beast charged forward at an incredible speed, moving in a zigzag pattern to avoid the deadly traps hanging in the air. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Rion noted that it had probably buffed itself with a spell similar to Lightning Enhancement, but there was no time for detailed analysis.

The approaching balls of lightning were problematic, but they were nothing compared to the white wolf itself. Everyone shifted to target the beast instead, throwing their respective long-range attacks at it while evading the bluish-white orbs around them. Their target was huge, sure, but it was also unnaturally nimble. Not many of their attacks actually landed.

::It's moving that fast even with my Quagmire Boots debuff?!::

"I'll stop it!" Gerard shouted.

"I can't very well let such a handsome gentleman take the brunt of everything, now can I?" Goldiana cried, also stepping forward.

The two men intercepted the approaching fangs together. Goldiana tried to hold its open snout down, and Gerard brought his greatsword to bear, but the beast's momentum seemed unaffected. Furthermore, it was still clad in its dangerous coat of lightning. Demon Sword Dainsleif was absorbing part of that energy, but not nearly fast enough. And even now, the remaining electric orbs were still closing in. Something else needed to be done, and fast.

::Sera, how about this?: Rion sent Sera a suggestion that her brain processed almost instantaneously.

::Sounds good!::

As Sera took off into the air again, Rion shouted, "Lambent!" to create a light source even higher up in the sky than her demon companion.

What're they doing? Goldiana wondered, being the only one not connected to the Network.

The wolf was equally bewildered as Sera's shadow perfectly aligned with its right eye.

::NOW!::

Alex, who had been lurking in the shadows until then, emerged and plunged Lethal Opiate Sword directly into their adversary's eye.

The monster let out a voiceless scream and the sword sank ever deeper as its victim writhed in agony. Alex, however, knew that it would be unwise to become overconfident and overstay his welcome, especially considering their opponent could unleash another electrical attack at any moment. When the timing seemed right, he dove back to safety through Sera's shadow.

::Nice job, Alex! Guys, the white wolf's sense of taste is gone!::

::That was a great idea, Rion. And robbing it of half of its vision — now *that's* what I'm talking about! Well done, Alex!::

::Arf!::

Everyone praised Alex in turn. It was the first time the group had dealt any significant damage to their enemy. Hiding Alex's presence at the start of the fight had paid off.

"You don't have time to be writhing in pain right now, cutie pie!"

"Finally, we agree on something!"

With the white wolf letting up on its assault, Goldiana and Gerard shifted from the defensive to pressing their attack. In spite of their odd dynamic, the two were surprisingly in sync.

"Teddy Bear Strike!!"

Goldiana, who had circled around to the wolf's right side — which was now in its blind spot— adopted a distinctive stance before unleashing a palm strike that connected cleanly with the beast's right foreleg, breaking its balance and causing it to tilt over.

"Dainsleif, unleash!"

At the same time, Gerard expended all the magic that his sword had absorbed to gain an explosion of attack power. The black blade expanded to several times its wielder's height, which made it extremely heavy. It was no longer something that could be lifted by any normal human, much less swung around.

"Hnnngggg...HAH!"

But Gerard not only managed to lift it, letting out a furious war cry as he did, he had no problem brandishing it in a furious assault. The gigantic sword sliced clean through the white wolf's left foreleg and penetrated its abdomen. The limb went flying as its owner's scream filled the air.

"ROOOAAARRRRRR!!"

Instinctively, the giant wolf tried to retreat. But the speed with which it had run circles around Sera and the others so far was no longer anywhere to be seen.

::Sera-nee!::

::Rion!::

The two noticed that fact and called out to each other at the same time. Now that the wolf had lost one of its forelegs, the girls, who were first and second in terms of Agility in the group, could finally match their opponent's movements.

"Grrrrrrr!"

Electricity crackled furiously across the coat of the retreating monster. Rion, who was approaching first, found herself being targeted by a flash of lightning that was likely the most powerful attack unleashed so far. The slightest graze would have been deadly. Even so, she continued to charge forward, her steps confident and sure.

"Hah!" She swung Caladbolg at the approaching bolt of pure

energy. In response to the wolf's surprise, she shouted, "You're not the only one who can absorb lightning!"

At the moment, Rion was not using Caladbolg as a weapon but as a shield. After fully absorbing the incoming attack, tiny sparks flashed furiously across the blade's surface.

During this time, the others had been closing in on the beast as well. It let up its assault on Rion to turn its attention their way. At that very instant, Rion cast the "doubled" version of Lightning Enhancement on herself. This move was her wild card, as it placed such a great burden on her body that after ten seconds of use, she would be unable to move a single muscle for a time. It was her intention to finish everything then and there.

The wolf, which had now lost an eye and a leg, was no longer capable of properly dealing with Rion in her bolstered state. Deftly combining the usage of Sky Walk and Acrobatics, she slashed at the creature up, down, left, right, and any other way she pleased while shooting by so fast that the beast didn't have time to make a sound.

With a soft tap, she landed gracefully on the far side of the white wolf. In her hands were Faux Holy Sword Will and Lethal Opiate Sword. She had called her partner up and exchanged swords with him immediately after casting Lightning Enhancement on herself. At the moment, Alex was wielding Caladbolg and Rion was wielding Lethal Opiate.

"Grr? GRRRR?!"

The white wolf was in a state of consternation. Its left eye, which was still unwounded, had inexplicably gone blind. Its sense of smell, which it had been relying on for much of the fight, was no longer sending any information. The creature's panic was understandable.

::The rest is all yours, Sera-nee:: Rion passed the baton as she collapsed where she stood.

::I've got you!:: Sera faced off against the beast, which had now been robbed of all five senses. She adopted a fighting stance even while flying into position with her Jin Scrimmage-buffed wings.

"GrrrrRRRROOAAARRRR!" the beast screamed in a final act of defiance. Perhaps it possessed a detection skill, as it managed to brandish its remaining foreleg with deadly-sharp claws at Sera, still determined to tear her to shreds.

She tried to parry with her left arm, but the attack was so precise that it managed to dig all the way through Jin Scrimmage and into her arm. The shockwave generated by the impact caused an explosion against the wall behind her.

"Even so...so what!"

Enduring the shockwave and the pain of her bloodstained arm, Sera held her right hand like a spear and swung it, clad in Armor

Corrosion, at the white wolf's throat. The razor-like claws that had appeared on her hand thanks to Jin Scrimmage easily penetrated her target.

Unable to even scream, the monster attempted to lift its left leg one more time in its prison of darkness. However...

"You got some of my blood on you, didn't you?"

Belying its will, the creature found its leg completely unresponsive. Consequently, it could not even retreat.

Sera's Unique Skill, Blood Dominion, enabled her to dominate whoever and whatever her blood came into contact with. If the target was a living creature, she would gain control of the specific body part that her blood was touching. If it was a piece of equipment, a magic spell, or a derivative of either, she could seize control of it and manipulate it as she pleased. This terrifyingly powerful skill was something she had inherited from her father, Demon Lord Gustav. If nothing else, it was indeed a skill that seemed fitting for one who ruled over demons.

Whenever Gerard sparred with Sera, he knew better than to slice at her. Instead, he would patiently stick to hitting her with the flat of his blade (hard enough to send her flying) so as to avoid falling victim to Blood Dominion. This adversary, however, had no way of knowing any of that, and had therefore fallen under her control.

During that fight with Melfina, I only used this skill to break down her magic and absorb it, but this shows its real value when...

The drops of Sera's blood that were on the wolf's leg drew from the monster's seemingly infinite magic reserves and directed all of that energy to her own palm. The beast remained frozen in place, anchored to the ground by its immobile leg. The only thing it could do was unleash its lightning elemental attacks, and its fur began to crackle again. But it was too late.

...it actually touches my opponent!

"Crucifixion!"

An inverted cross several times larger than the one generated during her fight with Melfina colored the trajectory of Sera's fist as it crashed onto the crown of the white wolf's head, staining every last inch of its pristine coat blood red.





“All this Rank S meat!”

“And we gained so many levels too!”

Sera’s and Rion’s cheers of victory rang out through the cave. The harrowing mood from the fierce fight just before had disappeared without a trace.

“Meat? Ah, never mind. Good work all around, dearies. That was quite the fight, wasn’t it?” Goldiana looked slightly startled and rather amused by the sudden celebration, but made sure to offer words of appreciation to the group. Even he, despite being a Rank S adventurer, would have had a hard time handling the white wolf on his own.

“This thing was strong enough to be *the* strongest, or at least the second strongest, monster that I’ve ever encountered. Now I know for sure that all of you will do wonderfully even at Rank S.”

“Still, that was a tiring fight,” Gerard admitted, rotating his shoulder. “I can’t wait to get home and throw back a drink.”

“Oh my, I sure could do with one too. I’ll join you!”

“On second thought, considering how tired I am, I really should head straight to bed!”

Goldiana attempted to grab Gerard’s arm, but the latter saw it coming thanks to his Mind’s Eye skill and managed to slip away in the nick of time.

“Ahem. So, how are we going to get this carcass back to Parth? I see that all of you dearies have storage-type magic items, but you can’t store something this big in them, can you?”

“What? Of course we can,” Sera answered, promptly sucking the large bulk into her mini-Clotho. Naturally, from Goldiana’s perspective, it looked like she was using some sort of magic item rather than a living slime.

“Goodness gracious, that is amazing. A magic item that can store something so big is legendary! And the same can be said for all your equipment. Where on earth did you dearies find such treasures?”

“We didn’t exactly ‘find’ them. I suppose you can say that we...” Her words trailed off.

“They’re self-made?” Goldiana asked incredulously. An awkward mood filled the air for a moment. “This year’s rookies sure are full of surprises! Now I’m more interested in Kelvin-chan than ever!”

“As I said, Kelvin is...off...limi...” Sera crumpled to her knees.

“S-Sera-nee?!”

“What happened, Sera-chan?! Are you hurt?!”

“That’s...not it...but...I don’t feel so good...”

Sera’s breath was ragged. The wound on her left arm had already

been treated with a recovery item, and her HP gauge was full. She wasn't suffering from any debuffs, either.

"First send word to my king!"

"Right, okay!"



"It should be any time now, I believe."

After completing the dinner preparations, I was waiting in front of the basement door for Master to be done with his training. Per Sera's request, I had gotten myself "fired up" about tonight's meal. Ruka and Ellie had also lent a hand, and I had poured as much love — ahem, *as much sincerity* as I could into the dishes while cooking them.

"Then again, isn't that what I normally do anyway?"

Still, I was sure that Master would eat it and tell me that it was delicious, just as he always did. The sight of him digging in with that blissful look on his face was something I would never tire of seeing. If possible, I'd have loved to feed him by hand like I used to, but since we were eating most of our meals with everyone else now, it had become difficult to find a chance to do so, which was a pity.

In that case, I'll make a late-night snack and bring it to him! Anyway, whatever happened to Sera-san? Thanks to Master's power, I could sense her general location. But she seemed to be rejecting all my telepathic messages. *I hope she makes it back in time for dinner.*

Creaaak.

I pulled myself together. *Looks like Master's just finished.*

"Seriously, was it really necessary to go that far? My bones actually broke from your submission holds and those spells you hit me with hurt. Even though we both have White Magic, there is such a thing as taking it too far..."

Judging from the ice shards and bloodstains on his robe, I surmised that Master had really been pushing himself during his training session. He must have cast White Magic on himself already, as there were no visible wounds on his body, but he was so tired that he had to use his longstaff as a walking stick. I would never cease to be amazed by his refusal to grow complacent and the way he continually pushed himself to aim higher.

It seemed like he had been speaking, but as it had been no louder than a soft mumble, I had not been able to catch his words.

"Oh, Efil...thanks for waiti—"

Just before he could finish the sentence, he staggered and almost fell. I rushed forward to catch him before he did. *Phew, I made it in time.*

"So soft..."

Once again, I couldn't hear what he was muttering, but there was

no time to worry about that. “Master, you appear to be exhausted. I have already drawn your bath. Would you like to relax in it for a while before dinner?”

“That...sounds good, thanks. I guess I am in pretty bad shape right now. All right, yes please to the bath.”

“Very well, Master.”

“Oh, a bath? Maybe I should take a dip too.”

I looked up just in time to see Melfina-sama emerging. *Didn't Master say that no one was allowed to go in? That's why I was waiting out here this whole time...*

“Efif, I know what you want to say, but don't worry, all I did was give him some kind advice on handling Rank S spells.”

Were my thoughts so easy to read? It seems I still have a long way to go as a maid.

“That was ‘kind advice’? It was more like ‘beat it into him’ from what I rem—”

“Hahaha, would you like to go for another round, honey?”

“Oh, man, I can't wait to get into the tub and refresh myself!”

Master seemed to miraculously recover and took off for the bath at top speed. *What a relief; it looks like I don't have to worry about him.*

“Oh, Master! I've already laid out a towel and a change of clothes in the dressing room!”

“Thanks, got it!”

And there, he's out of sight. Looks like Clo-chan's Gluttony skill is working out well for him.

“I'm sorry, Efif, for breaking my promise and entering the training room by myself.”

“It's fine; I understand that you did it out of necessity.” *Yet here I am getting emotional about it. How embarrassing.*

“Actually, if you had been there, you could have helped by providing additional ‘advice’ from a distance with your sniping. Ugh, I hate how hasty I am sometimes.”

“I...suppose so?” *What exactly is she talking about?* It wasn't often, but once in a while, Melfina would speak about things that I didn't quite understand.

“Well, there's no point crying over spilled milk, as they say. Efif, you should go help Kelvin wash his back. I know he just ran off like everything's all right, but his muscles are definitely fatigued.”

“Very well. Will you be joining us, Mel-sama?”

“I'm feeling a bit peckish, so I'll go look for something to snack on before dinner. Go on, don't worry about me.”

I hope the amount of food I prepared is enough...



After Efil and I got out of the bath and went to the living room, a string of fanfares going off in our heads all the while, I received an urgent telepathic message from Rion. To sum up what she said, they had encountered an extremely powerful enemy and, after defeating it, Sera had suddenly collapsed. Both her Status and HP seemed perfectly fine, and it wasn't clear what was causing her condition. Furthermore, Alex, who had retreated into Rion's shadow, also seemed to be feeling unwell. But of the two, Sera was doing the worst.

That sounds like it can only be one thing, I replied.

::You know what it is, Kel-nii?!::

If it's what I think, there's no need to worry. But it might be hard for them to do any more fighting in their current states. Gerard's with you too, right? Would you still be able to get back easily enough if I Unsummoned Sera and Alex to bring them home instantly?

::We're fine here, so please get them back quickly!::

All right, all right. Come on, what's with that voice? You sound like you're about to cry! Trust me, it'll be fine. And hey, Efil's really put her heart into tonight's dinner. So get back safely yourself.

::Okay, we'll be home in five minutes!::

Uh, there's no need to rush that much —

Before I could finish what I was saying, Rion cut off the connection. It made me happy that my little sister had grown into someone who truly treasured her companions. *But still, this is probably you-know-what, isn't it? Suddenly feeling unwell after a burst of consecutive level-ups with nothing unusual showing on the Status screen...those are the textbook symptoms of Evolution. Gerard's gone through it himself, and he's with them, so why're they so panicked about it? I guess it doesn't matter. Let's bring them straight back.*

I Unsummoned then immediately Summoned both Sera and Alex, the first on one of the sofas in the living room, the latter on top of his own special cushion, which I had retrieved from Rion's room.

"Sera-san's breathing seems erratic," Efil noted.

"Mhm. She looks like she's having an even harder time of it than Gerard did."

Alex was a bit lethargic as well but fully conscious, so we didn't have to worry about him as much. In contrast, Sera was breathing heavily and showing no signs of waking. I cast Relief, a White Magic calming spell, just in case, but it didn't seem to help much.

Melfina walked over to stand next to me. "It appears that Sera's body is undergoing a rather extensive transformation. She might turn into something quite incredible."

"Sera..."

Although I was sure this was simply the process of Evolution, I couldn't help but worry when I saw her this way.

“There isn’t much we can do here. All that’s left is to give her time,” Melfina continued before placing a hand on my shoulder. “Honey, you stay with her for the day. I believe that to be the best support she could possibly receive.”

I paused, then nodded. “All right, I’ll do that. But first, let’s get her up to her room.”

I carefully lifted her in the “princess carry” pose. She was lighter than I’d expected. I made sure to be extra careful of the invisible horns on her head, lest they poked me.

“I’ll bring up your meal later, Master.”

“Thanks.”

After carrying Sera to her room — a space filled with fishing equipment and modern-style costumes tailored by Efil — I tucked her into bed. Every once in a while, I cast White Magic on her again, which seemed to improve her coloring a little, although I might have been imagining it.

Jeez, making me worry about you this much. Just wait till you wake up; I’m going to scold you like there’s no tomorrow. “Let’s...keep going with the White Magic, I guess.” *Looks like this is gonna be an all-nighter.*

Having resolved myself to a long night, things were going well enough until a massively buff gay man with pigtails in blond ringlets came pounding on our door. The golems on guard duty identified him as an enemy, which prompted Efil and Melfina to prepare themselves for combat as well. But...that’s a story for another time.

Just thinking about dealing with the aftermath of that incident gives me a headache.



“I’m so sorry about what just happened. I found myself under attack, and my body simply reacted by itself.”

“Ahaha, please don’t worry about it, um, Goldiana-san.”

“Oh, you can call me Prettia-chan if you like. I like to keep things casual.”

“I...will do my best.”

I was currently in the lounge, sitting across from a man who’d identified himself as a Rank S adventurer. This big-boned individual with golden curls had been heading for our home when our golems had attacked him. Understandably, he had retaliated in self-defense, nearly obliterating them in the process.

I mean, I know it was a mistake on the part of our golems and they’re totally in the wrong, but if I saw him charging at me out of the blue, I’m sure I’d shift into battle mode too. I can’t really scold them even if I wanted to.

“Prettia-chan was in a hurry because he was so worried about

Sera-nee. But for some reason, the golems at our front gate were activated.”

“You did a great job of stopping things before they got out of control, Rion. Efil and Mel were about to get serious.”

It had been difficult to convince Efil, who had perched herself on the balcony with Penumbra fully drawn, and Mel, who had been about to rush out with her beloved spear in hand, to stand down. If Rion hadn’t intervened, we might not have had a garden anymore.

“I am truly ashamed.”

“Whoops.”

I shot a look at the ladies behind me. Efil did look genuinely remorseful, but Melfina was grinning widely. *You definitely knew and were doing it on purpose, weren’t you?!*

“Oh my, it looks like Sera-chan has significant competition...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, no, dear, I was just talking to myself. Kelvin-chan, you...aren’t quite what I imagined when I heard you were Rion-chan’s brother, but...this works too!”

“Seriously, what are you talking about?!” And Gerard, I saw you backing up a step there! Why’d you do that?! You’re making me feel more than a little anxious!

“By the way, Kel-nii, is Sera-nee okay?”

“Oh, yes, I’ve been worried about her too!”

Rion and Prettia leaned forward, eager for a reply. The former’s gesture was evocative of a cute bunny, while the latter’s rugged face seemed like it would have been accompanied by a number of “Rumble” effects in the background if we were in a manga. The pressure was so overwhelming that I instinctively wanted to draw back, but I controlled myself. *He’s just showing his concern for Sera, and I truly am thankful for that.*

“She’s currently being nursed by our maid, Ellie, who can cast simple White Magic spells. There’s no need to worry. Sera’s condition has settled down, and she’s resting now.”

“Oh, whew, that’s a relief...”

“My! Talk about a load off my chest!”

The two of them leaned back, settling into the cushioned sofa. *Looks like they really have been concerned.*

“Oh, right, Rion. It looks like Alex is on the verge of Evolving as well. He’s curled up in the living room, so how about checking up on him?”

“Really?! I’ll go right now!”

“Don’t run inside the house, though!”

“Uh, right, of course!”

You were just about to take off running, weren’t you?

Rion hopped off the sofa and opened the door to the corridor that led to where her partner was. She had probably maintained her telepathic contact with him the whole way home, but I figured she would want to be at his side at such an important moment. *Guess I can leave Alex to her, then.*

“Goldiana-san, I’m a bit late in saying it, but thank you so much for saving Sera and the others.”

“Oh, please, dear, what are you saying? I’m the one who should thank you. It was they who allowed us to almost completely eliminate the danger posed by the new dungeon. I believe the guild should be sharing the information we brought back with the other adventurers now. And Kelvin-chan, considering how close we are, you can drop the honorifics with me! Really!”

Uh, since when are we close? I mean, forming relationships with other Rank S adventurers is a good thing, but I feel like I’m in some other kind of danger here. Gerard, what was with that second step back?!

“Ahem, right, I’ll take your word for it. So, Prettia-chan, are you my opponent in the upcoming match?”

“My oh my, I suppose you would be curious. Rion-chan asked the same thing. That’s siblings for you!”

How can I not be curious? When talking about Rank S adventurers, the only other one I’ve met is the Beast King of Gaun. And both of you seem like you’d give me a pretty fun fight.

“Well, how about I explain the format of the practice match while I’m at it? First, your opponent will be Sylvia-chan, who was promoted to Rank S last year. She is known as the Ice Princess, and she’s a cutie pie with silver hair. That last part probably doesn’t mean much to you, though...” He trailed off as his gaze flickered over Efil and Melfina in turn.

What’re you looking at them for? You can’t have them. Just saying.

“That alias of hers...does it mean she’s a Blue Mage?”

“To be honest, I’ve never seen her fight. Normally, a new Rank S adventurer’s alias is given based on how they fought during their promotion match, but that didn’t happen with Sylvia-chan. Rio-chan at the guild might know more.”

“Never mind, then. I don’t know her abilities, and she doesn’t know mine. I’ll find out when we face off.”

“Oh my, what a manly thing to say!”

What’s more, Rio would consider giving me Sylvia’s information to be a favor, and there’s no telling what he’d expect me to do in return. Figuring out what this Sylvia is capable of will be part of the fun.

“A lot of VIPs from different countries will be coming to watch. If they like what they see, they might try to scout you out. However, I’ve never heard of an adventurer actually agreeing to such an offer. And

the guild leaves the decision to each adventurer's discretion."

"I have no intention whatsoever of being bound to a specific country. I've already told Rio that."

"Well, in that case, the guild should help you field the majority of those solicitations. They'll send you a summary afterwards, so make sure you take a look, all right, dearie?"

The guild will help me to block the solicitations? I can imagine how annoying it'd be turning them down one by one, so that's welcome news. But should we really be having so many VIPs gather in Parth when Trycen is clearly up to something? And how'd they all get the news so fast anyway?

"That leaves us with the format of the match. Among the VIPs will be the Oracle of Deramis, a cutie named Colette. You've heard of her, I hope?"

"Yes, I have." *Never mind having heard of her, I've gone dungeon-delving with the Heroes she summoned.*

"Then that saves me the trouble. Colette-chan will erect a special barrier around the grounds where you'll be fighting. She'll also cast a spell on both of you, which will nullify the damage from one fatal blow. That's why you can bring in whatever equipment you want. The moment that magic activates, the match is over. Cue the rain of cheering and applause."

"You breezed past it like it's nothing, but that's an incredible spell, isn't it? And wow, the Oracle sure has a lot of duties."

"Yes, the poor dearie will be spending most of the day utterly exhausted, MP potion in hand. I suppose that goes to show just how powerful those spells are."

Nullifying a fatal blow? That sounds a lot like the effect of Melfina's blessing. If I remember correctly, the Oracles of Deramis have all had the same blessing, haven't they? Did they reference that to come up with the spell?

::These are secret spells that have been passed down through generations of Oracles. Then again, they've been using such spells in this way for at least three hundred years, so I suppose they're not so secret anymore,:: Melfina chimed in.

I see. And the fact that these spells will be used for the match means I should be able to use Analyze Eye on them. Let's see if I can't develop a new spell or two of my own based on what I learn.

"And that's about all the explaining there is to do. Is there anything you didn't understand?"

"Nope, I think I've got it all. Thanks a lot, Prettia."

"Oh my! Don't smile at me like that, you cutie! I've already made a promise to Sera-chan! What's more, my heart is set on the wonderful Gerard-sama! Ah!" cried the mass of muscle while hugging himself

and writhing about.

I looked in Gerard's direction and found him all the way in the back, pressed up against the far wall.

Gerard, you...

::Please do not misunderstand, my king! My heart is and always will be for my wife alone!::

Uh, you were married before?

"I'm so sorry; I don't think I can take it anymore, so I'll be leaving now!" Goldiana cried. "Oh, there's no need to be polite and invite me to stay and all that. The guild should have already made arrangements for me."

"Uh, I see. That's...a pity."

I saw Prettia off, inwardly heaving a sigh of relief. *All right, there's only one day left until the match. A proper fight against a Rank S adventurer doesn't come often, so I'd like to get in as much training as I can before then, but...*

"Sera definitely comes first."

After giving Efil a heads-up, I returned to the sleeping princess's room.



"Nn..."

"Hey there, sleepyhead."

For several hours, I had continued to nurse Sera and cast White Magic on her. It was now around 2 am, a time when most of the city was fast asleep.

"What...happened? Where is...why am I here, Kelvin? I remember being in the cavern..."

Looks like she's still half asleep. "You collapsed down there, so I Summoned you here. Make sure to follow up with Rion and the others later, all right? They were really worried about you."

"Oh, right, I suddenly felt really sick and my sight went dark...and that's where my memory cuts off. I must have fainted..."

Am I imagining it, or does she seem somewhat despondent right now? "That's right. But it wasn't for nothing. Your Evolution was successful!"

"Evolution? What are you talking about?"

She still hasn't fully woken up yet? Ah, no, judging by her tone, she doesn't even know why she fainted in the first place.

"The reason you collapsed was because you were Evolving. And you've just woken up because the transformation finally finished. From what I can see, your appearance hasn't changed much, so how about checking your Status window?"

"Ooookay..."

It doesn't seem to have sunk in yet. I'm sure it'll hit home when she sees her Status, though. I should take a look with Analyze Eye too.

Sera (21 y/o, Female, Demon Blood Lord, Cursed Pugilist)

Level: 108

Title: Goddess Killer Pugilist

HP: 2,605/2,605 (+100)

MP: 2,746/2,746 (+100)

Strength: 1,317 (+100)

Endurance: 1,179 (+100)

Agility: 1,240 (+100)

Magic: 1,423 (+100)

Luck: 1,585 (+160) (+100)

Skills: Blood Dominion (Unique Skill), Bloodbending (Unique Skill), Combat Technique (Rank S), Black Magic (Rank A), Flight (Rank B), Presence Sensing (Rank A), Danger Detection (Rank A), Magic Detection (Rank A), Concealment Detection (Rank A), Dancing (Rank B), Musical Performance (Rank B), Super Luck (Rank B)

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Demon Lord, Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank S)

With the very significant increase across the board, Sera's stats now rivaled Melfina's, and she had even obtained a new Unique skill to boot. Going by the name, it was likely one that enabled her to control blood at will. Combined with Blood Dominion, which she had only been able to use in a passive way up until now, the variety of things she could do had just expanded substantially.

"This...is my power...?"

"It is your power, without a doubt. I think you have quite a few skill points still in the bank, so don't forget to spend them too. Also..." I looked straight into her eyes as she slowly sat up in bed. "I heard from Rion and the others that it was your idea to defeat a Rank S monster just so that I could eat it, right? And that it was ridiculously strong." *I wish they'd invited me to join them, but that's on me for putting up the "No Entry" sign on the door of the training room.*

"Um, I, er, didn't really have anything better to do, so finding an ingredient for you was more of a secondary goal, if anything. I-In other words, it's not like I did it just for your sake, all right?!"

"Even so, thank you." *And since when have you been a tsundere character? Still, that was cute, so it's totally fine with me.*

Sera gasped softly and her face turned as red as an apple. Steam was practically coming from the top of her head. "Argh, I'm fine already, so get out!" she cried, flapping her arms wildly like a child throwing a tantrum.

"All right, all right, I'm leaving." *It's not like I was teasing her, but*

it'll be a problem if she starts throwing things at me. I'd resolved myself to pulling an all-nighter, but seeing as she's regained consciousness and is kicking me out of her room, I guess I can go catch a few hours of sleep.

"You still haven't fully recovered, so get some more rest, okay? Good night, Sera."

"Hmph!" she snorted, turning her head away. But after a short pause, she followed it up with a proper, "Good night."

Here's hoping she'll be back to her usual good mood by morning.

A huge yawn came to me unbidden. "Wow, the sleepiness really hits like a brick when I relax. I really should get to bed."

I stumbled back to my own room, where I found Melfina fast asleep in my bed for some reason. I threw myself down beside her regardless. *Oh, right, she went straight to nursing Sera after helping me out with that hellish training session. I suppose that would tire her out, yep.*

My thoughts didn't get much further before my consciousness sank into darkness.



As always, Efil came to wake me up the next morning. While listening to the calming rhythmic chopping sounds coming from the kitchen, I cast my gaze over the list of the newest available quests that Ange had compiled for us.

The door suddenly banged open.

"Thank you for the wait, everyone! I! Am! Fully! RECOVERED!"

"Well, someone's up early today."

"Oh, only you and Efil are here?"

Normally, at this hour, Sera would be fast asleep. Melfina was...well, Melfina, but even Rion was still in bed. Efil was busy preparing breakfast, and Ellie was outside watering the garden.

"Gerard and Ruka went out for a walk. The rest are either sleeping or busy with something."

"Aww, I even went to the trouble of getting up early to show my new self off..."

"Your appearance hasn't changed, though, has it?"

"That's where you're wrong! My horns and wings got cooler!"

Which won't be visible unless you take off your hair clip. In any case, I'm glad to see you back to your normal self. At least your mood's improved. What a relief.

"Good morningggg." Rion shuffled into the dining room, yawning loudly and rubbing her sleepy eyes. On her heels was a certain shadow wolf who had just undergone an Evolution of his own.

Sera turned around. "Good morning, Rion! You're up early today!"

Rion stopped for a moment as her mind rapidly caught up. "Sera-nee! You're all better!" she cried, lunging forward to wrap the other in

a hug.

What an envia— ahem, heartwarming scene that is.

“All thanks to you. Sorry for making you worry. And you too, Alex...” Sera turned to look at the wolf and stopped short.

Oh right, I should probably share his new Status with everyone.

Alex (3 y/o, Male, Hróðvitnir)

Level: 92

Title: Hero's Partner

HP: 1,637/1,637 (+100)

MP: 560/560 (+100)

Strength: 1,154 (+320) (+100)

Endurance: 712 (+100)

Agility: 889 (+100)

Magic: 556 (+100)

Luck: 498 (+100)

Skills: Shadow Travel (Unique Skill), Creeping Darkness (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank S), Acrobatics (Rank S), Olfaction (Rank A), Covert Action (Rank A), Concealment Detection (Rank B), Herculean Strength (Rank A)

Passive Effects: Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S)

After checking the Network, Sera murmured, “You sure have grown a lot...”

“Arf!”

With his Evolution, Alex's species had changed. Both his stats and physical size had seen remarkable growth. Even when sitting, his head nearly reached the ceiling now. Instead of looking at him, it was more accurate to say that we were looking *up* at him. When he had entered the room, he had barely fit through the door.



Looks like I'll need to forge him a set of equipment on the scale of Gerard's greatsword.

"That's right! And he's grown so much stronger! Last night, I couldn't wait and brought him down to the training room for some special training, and —" Rion went on and on about her partner for a while, causing a questioning look — almost as if asking, "Um, you *were* worried about me too, right?" — to come over Sera's face.

"You finished your Evolution as well, right, Sera-nee? It feels like you have this dignified aura now."

"You can tell?! You really are different! Kelvin just told me that my appearance didn't change at all. So rude, right? You see, this part of my horn —"

Whoa, how did Rion turn that situation back around? What a frightening child. Or, I guess in this case most of the credit goes to Sera's easy-to-please nature.

"Oh, before I forget...Kelvin!"

"Yeah?"

"Yesterday...uh..." Here, Sera abruptly turned away. "Thanks for yesterday! I owe you one!"

"I would be happier if you could actually look me in the eyes while saying that..."

The answer that I got, delivered with absolute confidence, was a simple, "I can't yet!"

Chapter 2: Promotion Ceremony

After the last bit of training that I finished on the day before the ceremony, I was so exhausted that I could hardly walk properly. Since I couldn't muster the will to wash myself off in the bath, I asked Efil to simply wipe me down before I collapsed. Unlike the previous night, I couldn't even find it in myself to return to my room, so I made do with the big sofa in the living room.

"Couldn't you have come up with a better training method?" I grumbled. "Even I would die if we kept this up for several days in a row..."

"There is no method more efficient. Everyone exceeds their limits when their lives are in danger."

"Are you sure you're a goddess?"

The session I'd just endured had been even more intense than yesterday's. I had to continuously cast Boreas Death Scythe while evading Melfina's unrelenting assault, and accurately strike down her barrage of magical attacks. The instant I forgot to pay attention to my footing, icy restraints would sneak up on me and Efil's arrows would come raining down. Furthermore, every shot was released with the intent to kill, with her even going so far as to use her Pyrohydra Octonary move.

If I focused too much attention on Efil, Melfina would immediately go for my weak points. Parallel Processing had been working in serious overdrive. I desperately wanted to punch the overconfident version of myself from this morning, who had said, "I don't want you to go easy on me, all right? I can use White Magic to heal myself and Mel's here too, so don't worry about me getting hurt."

As a result, I was now both burned and frostbitten all over. *I suppose this is the perfect example of "you get what you ask for." But let it be on the record that I did manage to heal myself without relying on Mel!*

"That's why I'm giving you both the carrot and the stick, aren't I? All right, turn around, I'm doing your left ear now."

"Half of me feels appeased and the other half feels like I shouldn't be. What do I do about these conflicting emotions?"

If the hellish training was the "stick" then this must have been the "carrot." At the moment, my head was resting on Melfina's lap as she cleaned my ears for me. Although she wasn't nearly as good as Efil was, I found it strangely calming. It didn't leave me with a whole lot

to complain about, to my chagrin.

“Are you enjoying it?”

“Ugh...yes, I am.”

“Glad to hear it.”

I'm willing to forgive her already just for doing this? Am I that easy?

“So, Sera and the others...” Melfina murmured. “That surprised me.”

“Hm? Oh, their Evolutions? Yeah, they've gotten so strong.”

“Oh, no, I was referring to the monster they defeated.”

The monster? The white wolf we ate for lunch today? It's true the size of it surprised me when it was first removed from Clotho's Storage. But it was absolutely scrumptious. Efil outdid herself once again.

“That wolf was one of the Divine Pillars that my predecessor created and placed in various locations around the world. To think they actually managed to defeat it...”

Okay, I did not see that coming. “Hold on, we ate it, though.”

“Mhm, it was delicious. I loved it.”

“That's hardly the issue, is it?! I meant to say, isn't it bad that we killed it?!”

“Oh, it's fine. My predecessor was apparently up to something unscrupulous with the Divine Pillars, which led to all of them being decommissioned. By the time I became a goddess, they had all but lost their function. Having them contribute to your growth is worth more than leaving them lying dormant. My guess is that this one activated because Sera touched it. On paper, the Pillars are meant to be backups in case a need to exterminate the Demon Lord or the demon race ever arises.”

“Ah, so it reacted to her in particular. What is it that your predecessor planned to do with these Pillars anyway? Did she go mad and plot to wipe out everyone in the world or something?”

“What did she plan indeed? Okay, I'm done with this side too.”

She clearly dodged the question there. I lifted my head from Melfina's lap and sat up. “Is this perhaps related to your question about Clive yesterday? You got all serious so suddenly, and when I confirmed that he'd claimed to be a transmigrator, you looked surprised.”

“Uh, I wasn't sur—”

“Please, how long have we been together now? I've almost never seen you surprised, so I noticed it straight away.”

“Why is it that you are so oblivious in some ways, yet strangely sharp when it comes to things like this?” She gave me a wry smile. “I didn't want to trouble you with the affairs of deities, but...”

“Please tell me as much as you can.” *Otherwise, my curiosity will keep me awake all night.*

Melfina sighed. "All right, then. You remember my explanation about the difference between otherworld summoning and actual transmigration?"

"Mh-hmm, just before I summoned Rion. What about it?"

"Aside from being summoned by way of a blessing like you and Colette did for the Heroes, it is possible for otherworlders to wander into this world by accident. It's quite rare, but it does happen. I believe the most apt term for it in your previous world would be, 'Being spirited away.' There are many different reasons for it to happen, ranging from accidents to sheer coincidences. Almost all otherworlders here belong to this second category and are called wanderers."

I did find it a bit strange how familiar residents of this world seemed to be with the concept of otherworlders, despite there only being one person who could actually summon them. *I suppose Tsubaki-sama's ancestor, the one who founded her country, falls under that category.*

"However," Melfina continued, "there are no exceptions to transmigration summoning; that is a process that *must* be facilitated by the Goddess of Reincarnation. My subordinate was the one who handled Rion's summoning, but only because I provided her with my power while she did."

"But you weren't involved with Clive's transmigration."

"I was not."

"Could it have been performed by your predecessor, then?"

"My predecessor has already lost all her powers. To be more exact, she no longer exists. Additionally, it's only the goddess currently in office who can wield the power of reincarnation. The times I stepped away were largely because there were matters that needed an in-person application of my power. There is only so much I can leave to my subordinate, after all."

She was actually working? Considering how much she lazes around, I can't picture it...

"Were you thinking something rude just now?"

"While we're having such a serious talk? Psh, of course not."

No, no, this won't do. I'm starting to have difficulty concentrating from the exhaustion. At the very least, I should use Nerves of Steel to maintain a poker face. So, Clive...I mean, that sounds like quite the mystery, then. If only I hadn't missed my shot, we might have had some way of investigating further.

"There is technically a chance of a transmigrator from my predecessor's time still being alive today, but it's incredibly slim. Alternatively, there may be someone besides me who has attained the power of reincarnation. That isn't likely, though."

"I see. So, the real reason you decided to tag along with me is to look into this."

"Nope, I'm one hundred percent here as a private thing," Melfina replied, waving my idea away. "I'm thoroughly enjoying myself."

How can you say that so nonchalantly?! Isn't this an important issue for you?!

"Well, I was just brainstorming, that's all. You don't have to worry about it too much, honey. Although I suppose my saying that will have the opposite effect."

"From what we know right now, Trycen and Rizea — which Gerard wants revenge against — seem to be the most obvious candidates. Unfortunately, there isn't much information on Rizea here on the Eastern Continent. Deramis might have some, so we should make a trip there eventually. Oh, and it'd probably be a good idea to speak with the Oracle tomorrow. Then again, we can't entirely rule out Deramis, either..." *Ugh, there's too much to think about. My brain needs sugar.*

"Since you already seem to have a game plan, I'll just stick with you, honey."

"Hold on, wouldn't it be more effective for you to talk to the Oracle yourself? Can you ask her in person tomorrow?"

"I forgot to mention this earlier, but I'll be staying inside your magic pool for the entire day tomorrow."

"Oh, right, it's probably a bad idea for you to walk around where the higher-ups of Deramis are present." *The Oracle has even met Melfina face-to-face before, so she might recognize her at a glance.*

"That's true too, but...honestly, that girl is a bit sick."

"Sick?" *Sick how?*

BAM!

Before I could ask for more details, the door to the living room burst open. *C'mon guys, at least open the door properly. The damn thing's going to come off its hinges soon.*

"Kelvin! Let's go grab a drink as a pre-celebration for tomorrow!" Sera shouted, in extremely high spirits.

"My king! Let's drink till dawn!" Gerard added, already looking somewhat tipsy.

From her perch on the knight's shoulders, Ruka squealed with laughter and cried, "Dawn!"

Rion was sliding into the room with her arms around Sera's waist as if she was trying to pull her back. Sheepishly, she said, "Sorry, Kelvinii. I couldn't stop them."

Efil was standing close behind them, with Clotho perched on her shoulder.

Melfina looked up and chuckled. "Oh my. Everything in

moderation, all right?”

“Uh, I’m seriously super sleepy right now,” I protested weakly, knowing full well that it would be in vain. And so, I mustered my last remaining scraps of energy and cast Clean on myself.



“Please enjoy yourselves and take care.”

After entrusting Ellie to manage the house in our absence, I was half dragged by Sera and the others to the Fairy’s Song. But the exhaustion from my training wasn’t so easily overcome, causing me to rely on Black Staff of Disaster as a walking stick once again. It didn’t make for a very good look for a Rank S adventurer, so I shifted to borrowing Efil’s shoulder after we passed through the front gate. *Now I at least look like I’m suffering from an honorable wound taken during a fierce battle, don’t I? I hope I do. Please say I do.*

“You seem really excited about this, Sera, but you do realize that you’re bad with alcohol, right?”

“I’m not going to be drinking; I just love the atmosphere of celebrations!”

But every time you show up to these things to “enjoy the atmosphere,” you end up completely sloshed and I end up in mortal danger.

“I’m sorry about this, Kel-nii. I know that tomorrow’s such an important day, but I no longer have the strength to stop Sera-nee, not after her latest power boost.”

“Um, everyone, my understanding is that this is simply meant to be a meal. If it’s a full-blown party, I don’t think we should be doing it tonight.” *Efil and Rion, you two are my last bastions of hope. Honestly, I think I’ll collapse on the spot if I drink a single cup of alcohol.*

“What are you two saying?! It’s precisely because it’s an important day that we’re doing this to raise morale!” Sera cried.

“Indeed! I haven’t had a chance to drink a single drop today, so I intend to fully enjoy myself tonight!”

“Indeed! I’ll enjoy myself too!”

Gerard, you’ve clearly had more than a few glasses already. Ruka sure looks like she’s having fun riding on his shoulders and copying the way he speaks, but isn’t her articulation kind of shaky? Almost as if she’s dru—

“Gerard, don’t tell me you let Ruka have alcohol?!”

“As if I would do that to my precious granddaughter! She snuck a few bites of a liquor pound cake baked by Efil earlier. She’s been like this ever since.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Master. It was my oversight. I left the cake unattended in the kitchen, and she seems to have gotten into it. She couldn’t help much with the housework in her current state, so I let her come along per Gerard-san’s request.”

“So, that’s what’s going on. Well, I can’t imagine the alcohol content in the cake was too high, so I’m sure she’ll be fine. But still, make sure you look after her properly, all right, Gerard?”

“No need to tell me twice, my king. Once she starts dozing off, we’ll return home.”

Given how much Gerard treasures Ruka, I probably don’t have to worry about her. I’ll just stay next to Efil and keep a close eye on Sera. Not that that’s ever worked out for me, but still.

“Honey, is it true the Fairy’s Song serves that legendary dish called ‘curry’?!”

Seriously, have I ever gotten out of any of these feasts unscathed?



“Clare! We’ve arrived!”

The Fairy’s Song was an inn and tavern that we were as familiar with as our own house. For us, this place was like a familial home, and Sera treated Clare as if the proprietress were her mother. We all visited the place frequently.

“Ah, there you are! I’ve been waiti— hold on, what’s happened to you, Kel-chan?!”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about me; I just got back from a quest.” *Yep, delivered that line perfectly, if I do say so myself. But still, this place really doesn’t change, does it? Clare’s cheerful voice and all.*

“Here you go, Clare! I put a whole lot of work into catching this one!” Sera announced as she pulled an enormous fresh-looking fish out of the bag that was slung over her shoulder.

Ah, she brought a souvenir for Clare-san. I was curious about what she had in there the whole time we were walking over.

“Now that is one amazing specimen! Thanks as always, Sera.”

“Don’t worry about it! I fish so much that finishing all of it by ourselves is...well, not impossible, but you’re always taking such good care of us!”

You just glanced at Melfina, didn’t you? Luckily, Melfina didn’t seem to take it personally.

“I’ll put my best efforts into cooking it! Efil-chan, would you mind helping out?”

“I’d love to. Master, I’ll be stepping away for a while.”

“Sure, sure. But please come back as soon as you can,” I muttered, my voice trailing off as I watched Clare and Efil disappear into the kitchen. *My bastion of hope...*

“So, tonight’s meal will be seafood curry!” exclaimed a certain gluttonous goddess.

No, I don’t think that’s the plan.

“Oh, hey, Kelvin! Heyyyy! This way, we reserved a table for you

guys!”

“Oh, Uld-san!”

The person waving us over was our fellow adventurer, Uld. Bumping into him at the Fairy’s Song was a relatively rare occurrence, but tonight was one such exception. He even seemed to be expecting me. When I took a proper look around, I realized most of the other customers were adventurers that we knew well.

“Kel-nii, those are our seats, he said! Let’s go!” Rion suggested, ducking under my arm to support my weight and guiding me over. She made it look completely natural.

“Hahaha, someone’s in a hurry,” I replied in an effort to play along as I blinked back tears, touched by my sister’s consideration.

The table indicated by Uld was a rather large one that had enough space to seat my entire party. I lowered myself into one of the chairs with a mental “Heave-ho.” If it seemed like an old man thing to do, that was simply an indication of how badly my legs and hips were faring. I wanted very much to plant my face onto the table, but I controlled myself.

“I heard from Gerard-dono and Sera that you guys were having a big pre-celebration tonight. Once the word spread, our regulars all got together. We were waiting for you since we couldn’t very well start the party without our guest of honor!” he said with a hearty laugh.

“Really? I was only told about this party just now...”

“As the youngsters call it, it’s a ‘surprise,’ my king. Sera and I planned it together!”

“We did our best!”

The sentiment makes me happy, it really does, but why did you have to do it on a day when I’m this tired?! To be fair, neither Gerard nor Sera know the details of my training, so I can’t really blame them. I guess I have no choice but to accept the situation.

“How about we get this underway already? Clare, alcohol, please!”

“You come in here and do it yourself! I’m busy with the cooking right now!”

“Uh, yes, ma’am.”

Clare’s shout prompted Uld to immediately get up and walk to the kitchen, clearly demonstrating who was the boss in the relationship. But seeing as the other adventurers had also leaped into action to help out, it was undeniable that Uld commanded great respect himself.

“I’ll also h—”

“You stay seated, Kelvin-san! We’ll get everything set up in a jiffy!”

“That’s right, that’s right! We’d lose face if we let the guest of honor help out!”

When I tried to express my desire to help out, I was stopped by the others. Honestly, I wasn't sure I could even stay on my feet, so I wasn't complaining. *I should thank them properly at a later date.*

As the two men left, Efil approached our table with glasses in her hands.

"Master, I was worried that wine might negatively affect your performance tomorrow, so..."

"Grape juice? Good call, Efil. Thanks."

My maid bowed slightly. "It may be a feast, but if you end up having a hangover the next morning, that would defeat the purpose."

"Efil-nee, I want juice too. Do I grab it from over there?" Rion asked, prompting Sera to go, "Oh, juice for me, too!"

Thinking about it, the girls in my party generally don't drink, do they? Melfina might have a bit now and then if it complements what she's eating, though.

"What will you have, Mel-sama?"

"I'd like the same thing as everyone else."

With everyone present helping out, preparations for the feast were soon finished and Gerard stepped forward to make the toast. Ruka, in her maid uniform, interrupted him and sort of threw the start into disarray, but it didn't take long for things to settle back down. Uld and the other adventurers who knew me all took turns coming to pour me a glass, but I politely rebuffed each of them in turn, citing the next day's match as my excuse. Thankfully, they were understanding and let me off the hook to drink only juice.

Rion and I were sitting on either side of Sera to ensure that she didn't have a single drop of alcohol. Every once in a while, my demon friend would happily pour me a new cup of juice. It was starting to look like I might actually make it through the feast without being strangled.

"You gotta let me hear the full details of your battle in the Forest of Elves sometime, Kelvin-san! Promise us!"

"Aha! If you are interested, I will —"

"Don't you dare, Gerard."

The feast was about halfway through, my embarrassing history had been brought up, and Ruka was starting to get sleepy. I was just about to instruct Gerard to send her home when a new party of adventurers walked through the door.

"The fuck? This place is full too."

The first one to speak was a beastkin man. He had dog-like ears on top of his head and extremely sharp eyes that gave him a belligerent look.

"Nagua, all of these places are packed the night before the ceremony. It's our own fault for arriving late. Let's just be thankful the

guild prepared places for us to sleep tonight.”

The second speaker was an elf lady who, in sharp contrast to her companion, gave off an air of intelligence. *An elf here in Parth? That's rare.*

Following the beastkin and elf, two girls and a male dwarf also walked in.

“My stomach...growling...”

“Sylvia, please bear with it for just a little longer.”

“Ugh, even I’m about to collapse from hunger.”

My ears perked up. *Hold on, “Sylvia”?*



The customers near the door soon noticed the new arrivals. The silver-haired girl’s equipment identified her as a Swordswoman, while the dwarf was a Heavy Warrior, the elf a Mage, and the beastkin a Pugilist. The red-haired girl alone was wearing equipment that seemed too generic to indicate her class.

“Those sure are unfamiliar faces. I know I’d remember such beauties.”

“They’re probably here for Kelvin-san’s ceremony, right? And they rushed here to barely make it in time but can’t find lodging or food ’cause the inns and taverns are all full. Happens every single time. There were plenty like that at the ceremony in Gaun last year. I mean, I was one of them, so I’d know, hahaha!”

“Forget them! Efil-chan’s new fish dish is coming out next! Supposedly, it’s a secret recipe that the head chef of the Queen of Toraj taught her directly!”

“Seriously?! Then what’re we sitting on our asses here for?!”

“Calm down, guys. It’s going to be served to everyone here.”

The local adventurers’ attention did not linger on the strangers for long. In fact, the newcomers were almost promptly forgotten as everyone returned to their food and drink.

“Did you hear that? There’s some big-shot chef here. I’d love to try some of that cooking myself.”

“Come on, Kokudori, don’t be unreasonable. Let’s check out the next tavern,” said the elf as she turned to leave.

“Secret recipe...I’m sure it’d be so good...”

“I’m sure it is, Sylvia, but don’t look so down. Please? Here, I’ll give you my last piece of jerky.”

“Mm, thank you.”

The silver-haired girl who they referred to as Sylvia looked extremely dispirited. The tiny sounds emanating from her stomach — which weren’t audible over the ruckus of the place, thankfully — indicated that it had truly been a while since she’d last had a proper

meal. She accepted the piece of meat offered by the red-haired girl and started nibbling on it.

“Ah, fuck it! Gimme a sec, Sylvia.”

“Nagua, what are you doing?” asked the elf with alarm as she saw the beastkin turn to wade into the crowded tavern.

“If there’s no room, I’ll just *make* room. I’ll chase out some other group.”

“Are you out of your mind?! Don’t cause a scene!”

Growl...

The moment the elf shouted at him, her stomach also gurgled loudly. She was starving too but had been pretending otherwise. Her white skin flushed red with embarrassment.

“You wanna repeat that, Ariel?”

“Th-That was —”

“No violence, Nagua.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll, uh, do my best.”

It wasn’t clear if Sylvia’s admonition actually got through or not. Regardless, the beastkin dove into the crowd in search of a target.

“If we leave it to Ariel, we’ll never get a scrap of food till hell freezes over. How much longer is she gonna make Sylvia walk for, anyway? As always, it falls on me to take care of things!” is probably what’s going through Nagua’s mind at the moment, the red-haired girl, Ema, thought. It was clear in her eyes that he had the hots for Sylvia.

Nagua scanned the store, looking for a reason to pick a fight with somebody. Then his eyes fell on a certain group.

“This isn’t exactly a gift for helping to nurse me yesterday, but, um, there’s something I want to give you. I said some pretty hurtful things at the time...oh, your glass is empty. Here, here, here, let me refill it.”

“Sera-nee, go easy on the drinks! It’s already his sixth cup!”

“It’s fine, Rion, this isn’t wine. It’s not like I’m going to get drunk off grape juice. And Sera, seriously, don’t worry about yesterday. I did it because I wanted to; you don’t owe me anything.”

“Honey, it’s dreadful. The curry still hasn’t come out yet!”

At the center of the table was a young man wearing black from head to toe. On one side, a red-haired beauty was pouring him a drink, while on the other, a demure-looking blue-haired girl was clutching his arm, trying to grab his attention. There was another really cute girl — and this was where Nagua’s sight went red. He had failed to notice the giant suit of armor sitting across from the young man in black.

Oh yeah, it’s gotta be that fucker. I can just kill him outright, can’t I? I’d probably be forgiven for doing it!

With the veins on his temple throbbing visibly with rage, the

beastkin stomped across the room, both for the sake of alleviating Sylvia's hunger and for the sake of unleashing his own resentment.



As Sera filled my cup back up, I turned part of my attention towards the beastkin who was approaching the table. According to Prettia's information, the silver-haired girl was likely my opponent for tomorrow. I had been keeping an eye on her group from the moment I'd heard the name "Sylvia" mentioned, but I didn't intend to start anything on our side. I was hardly in the best shape at the moment anyway.

Contrary to my desire for a peaceful evening, however, the beastkin who seemed to be one of Sylvia's party members had started angrily making his way over. He had a naturally intimidating face and the aura of a delinquent, but the instant he spotted me, I could feel the rage all but bursting out of him.

What did I do?

"Um, this —"

It looked like Sera was about to take something out of her chest pocket, but unfortunately, the stranger didn't notice and cut her off.

"Hey there, nice guy with the black hair. Looks like you're rather enjoying yourself, aren'tcha?"

"Uh...do I know you?"

"Hah! Nope, it's our first meeting! I'm sorry, man, but can you give us this table? Y'see, every last fucking tavern is full, and I'm about to die of hunger here. You look like a nice guy; I'm sure you get me, yeah?"

What a blatantly provocative attitude. Does he think we'll back off if he threatens us? I don't want to cause a scene, but I'm not going to let someone walk all over us. Sera and Gerard went to the trouble of preparing this feast for my sake; I'm not about to let it be called off.

"No can do, I'm afraid. You see, we booked this table in advance. How about trying somewhere else?" I replied with a business-like smile. *If he backs off, we're good. If he tries anything, we'll respond in kind.*

"Hah! Look at you putting up a front for a bunch of girls! What, you still don't get it? I'm not asking, I'm *telling* you to get fuck outta that chair!"

The man's shout drew the attention of the adventurers around us. They all turned, curious about what was happening. Gerard and the others stayed silent, but I noticed them raising their guards.

"Don't make me repeat myself. I said no. Are your ears for decoration?"

"You have balls at least, I'll give you that! Step outside. I'll make

you regret —”

“Regret, you said?”

I had never heard Sera use such a cold voice before. She slowly gripped the edge of our table, where deep cracks began to spider across the surface until it splintered apart entirely. This was the very thick, tough kind of table often used by adventurers to have arm-wrestling matches and the like, so crushing it to pieces so easily was no joke. Gerard and Rion desperately saved the dishes atop it in the nick of time. Melfina did her part as well by scooping up the large plate of steamed chicken before the table disintegrated beneath it.

“There’s no need to step outside. I’ll finish you here and now,” Sera growled as she stood. Black Magic was roiling around her fists and her eyes were glowing an even deeper shade of crimson than usual.

Uh, I did not see this coming. You all right, Sera?!

::Ah, yes, demons’ eyes do that when they get angry. She’s what you might describe as having currently ‘flipped her shit,’:: Melfina commented calmly as she popped a piece of chicken into her mouth.

Why’s she so angry, though?!

::She’d just drummed up her courage to do something else when that guy interrupted her. Pretty uncanny stroke of bad timing, considering how high her Luck is::

Nobody seemed to notice my bewilderment as the entire venue heated up.

“It’s a fight! A fight’s starting!”

“Why does that beastkin have to start something right before Efil-chan’s newest dish comes out?!”

“Guys, guys, shove your tables aside. And be careful not to break anything! Or else Clare will kill me!”

“Which one you betting on?”

“You mean, how many seconds am I betting on, right? It’s my first time seeing Sera-san so mad.”

Thanks to the adventurers’ efforts, the arena was set up in the blink of an eye. The round tables were lined up against the walls to form a makeshift fence and simplistic guest seating was created around it. Someone even threw together a betting pool.

What is with this ridiculously perfect teamwork even though they’re all so drunk?!

“Just saying, I don’t lay hands on women and children. Have Black Hair face me himself!”

“Woof, woof, woof? What a noisy dog. If you’re chickening out then just say so.”

“The fuck you say?!”

Sparks flew furiously between Sera and the stranger. At the same

time, the rest of Sylvia's party hurried over.



“E-Excuse me! We’re members of the same party as this stupid dog over here! Please let me apologize for his disrespect! I’m so sorry!”

Upon reaching us, the elven lady immediately offered a ninety-degree bow, which was promptly followed by Sylvia, the red-haired girl, and the dwarf also offering their sincere apologies.

“I will take full responsibility and drag the idiot out of here myself! Please, I beg you, stop this fight. Naturally, we will reimburse you for the trouble we’ve caused!”

“I’d love for the commotion to settle down too, but...” I looked over at Sera, who hadn’t accepted any of the telepathic messages I’d been sending over the last few minutes. “It looks like it’s too late. There’s no choice now but to let things play out.”

“B-But that’s — your companion is in great danger! That man is ‘Brutal Beast’ Nagua, an adventurer with an alias!”

“An alias? Wow.”

“That’s why you need to put a stop to this —”

“Ariel, that’s not it,” Sylvia said, shaking her head and placing a hand on the elf’s shoulder. “The one that’s in danger is Nagua.”



The adventurers surrounding the makeshift arena were reaching a fever pitch. Due partly to the alcohol and partly to the festive mood enveloping the city, everyone was more hyped up than usual.

“Gerard-san and Sera-chan even planned a show for tonight?! They sure do things on a different scale than the rest of us. So, who’s the dude?”

“Omigod! You got this, Sera-sama! You’re my idol!”

“Honey, what is all this commotion, hm?”

“C-Clare?! No, it’s not my fault, things just sort of happened!”

“Beastkin dude, please hang in there for ten seconds!”

The majority of adventurers gathered in the tavern tonight were personal acquaintances, leading to most of the voices being in support of Sera. Then again, the trigger for the fight had been flat-out bullying, so the ratio of her supporters to his would probably have been the same even if we’d been in some other establishment.

“Hah! All you fuckers saying whatever the fuck you want. Ten seconds? Making me laugh.”

“First time we agree on something. I only need three seconds.”

“WHOOAAAA!!”

Sera lifted three fingers, prompting the crowd to explode with cheers and shouting. The veins on Nagua’s forehead were so swollen that they seemed ready to burst at any moment.

“Woman, I haven’t told you who I am yet, have I? My name is

Nagua. You ever heard of ‘Brutal Beast’ Nagua? Huh?”

A portion of the adventurers surrounding us stirred upon hearing his name.

“Isn’t ‘Brutal Beast’ the mercenary who accompanies Ice Princess?”

“The one that’s famous for being considered brutal even in Gaun?”

“Hold on, but I heard he lost to a female swordsman last year.”

So, this Nagua dude actually has made a name for himself, huh. And that last piece of information is probably referring to Sylvia, isn’t it?

“Never heard the name. Who’re you?”

“Fuck! This is why ignorant women are just...forget it. Let’s do this.”

“Sounds good. Rion, give us the signal.”

Rion shot me a worried look. “Umm...”

“Don’t worry, Rion. Believe in Sera. In spite of how it looks, she won’t do anything that would put us in a bad position. She does know how to control herself when it counts.” *When she’s sober, that is.*

“Hold on, Nagua,” Sylvia said just as it seemed the fight was about to begin. “You shouldn’t do this. You can’t beat her.”

“Hah! Sylvia’s actually cracking a joke? What a lucky day this is! Don’t worry, I’ll drop this woman in a second and we’ll go grab some food.”

“Um, I wasn’t joking.”

“Seriously, don’t worry. Stand back, I got this.”

Nagua waved his hand in a “shoo, shoo!” motion, and Sylvia reluctantly returned to her spot. Seeing as the red-haired girl immediately turned to comfort her, perhaps her mental fortitude wasn’t all that high.

Why is Nagua making a face like he’s doing Sylvia a favor? Wait, did he misunderstand and think she was just saying that because she’s worried about Sera? And it’s too late to back out now, so...oh boy, he’s going to be in for a surprise.

“Sorry for the wait. C’mon, let’s start.”

Nagua bent his knees and leaned forward slightly, adopting a pose reminiscent of a hunter going after its prey. In contrast, Sera simply stood with her legs spread and arms crossed, showing no intention whatsoever of taking up a fighting stance.

“Both sides ready?”

Rion lifted her small hand, drawing the attention of all eyes present. Silence filled the tavern as everyone watched with bated breath. Then her hand fell. It might as well have been slicing right through the tension in the air.

Nagua shot forward, staying low to the ground. His movements were supple, like that of a beast, instantaneously reaching a speed

faster than the eye could follow.

Pretty impressive acceleration right there.

“Well, let’s enjoy th—bfffptttt!”

“Three seconds.”

Sera suddenly seemed to appear right in front of Nagua’s eyes, too fast for him to register. In an instant, he was flying through the swinging doors of the Fairy’s Song. Violent sounds of sliding and bouncing continued for a short while outside, with no one uttering a peep until the noise subsided.

“Would you look at that? He actually went outside,” Sera commented, resuming the same confident pose from before the start of the fight.

“N-NAGUA!!” shouted the elven lady, Ariel, as she rushed out after him. *Did she also fail to take Sylvia’s warning seriously?* Her voice served as a trigger that brought the other adventurers to their senses.

“Bro, did you even catch what happened?”

“Nah, man, all I got was that Sera-san suddenly appeared in front of the guy and did something to him...”

“I saw it! I saw Sera-sama’s fist landing on his face!”

The adventurers who had been relegated to the role of audience seemed to be having trouble understanding what they had just witnessed. Considering most of them were around Rank D, merely having caught the last blow that sent Nagua flying — because there *wasn’t just one* — was quite impressive.

“Kokudori, Ema, did you see that?” Sylvia asked, turning to her companions.

“That was a total of three — no, four attacks?” murmured the dwarf, Kokudori, stroking his beard. “It was all so fast that I could barely see it even while focusing solely on the action. I wouldn’t stand a chance against her one-on-one either.”

The red-haired girl, Ema, had a look of astonishment on her face. “She shifted from that unguarded pose to accurately catch Nagua on his chin while he was still in the middle of accelerating. It was incredible.”

Clearly, these two were significantly more capable than Nagua and Ariel. I chose not to use Analyze Eye on them, though, as they were standing close to Sylvia and I really wanted to wait until our fight to find out her abilities.

They were right, though. Sera had indeed delivered four attacks within three seconds. As Nagua ran forward at high speed, she had closed the distance in one step and thrown a light jab at his chin. I say jab, but it was more of a pinpoint attack delivered by the one and only Sera. I myself wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of such a blow.

Nagua's brain was severely shaken by it, and he had instantly lost consciousness. If left alone, he would have simply fallen to his knees right then, and the match would have been over. Sera, however, had no intention of letting him off that easily. As he was starting to fall, she had uppercutted him to make him fly back up into the air just a bit. What with falling and flying and everything in between, he was a pretty busy person during those few seconds. While he was at the top of his trajectory and just about to fall once again, she had driven in a left body blow before planting a right straight onto his face to finally send him out of the "ring." He was basically just a punching bag at that point.

Even so, she had clearly held back. If she had gotten serious, even with her bare fists she could have changed the appearance of every single part of his body. He was severely injured, but not dead. His companions could heal him up easily enough.

"You three don't look all that worried about what happened to your friend. Aren't you going to go check on him too?"

"Um, it appears your lady friend went easy on him, so I'm sure he'll be fine," Sylvia replied.

"What makes you think that?" My Rank S Concealment was applied to everyone in my party. That meant that even if Sylvia possessed Analyze Eye at Rank S, she couldn't have seen Sera's Status.

"Um...intuition?"

Oh, she's another Sera.

::Kel-nii, the beastkin seems all right, although only just. His elf companion is healing him with magic right now. Looks like he did lose a few of his teeth.::

Upon hearing Rion's report of Nagua's state, I replied, *Understood. Leave the rest to the elf and come on back.*

::Okay!::

All right, that's one thing taken care of. Now I have to handle things here inside.

"Sylvia says that Nagua's fine," Ema said hesitantly, "so he's probably fine. I think this would be a good lesson for him too. So, about all the trouble we've caused your side...um..."

She struggled to find her next words. I could tell roughly what she was thinking, though. A member of a party led by Sylvia, a Rank S adventurer, had picked a fight with someone with no name and actually lost the fight. There were plenty of other adventurers who had been present and could testify to it. This was a situation that could very well negatively affect Sylvia's name. Ema probably wished for the matter to be kept under wraps, but had no idea what to do about it. Luckily for her, I had no desire to make it into a big thing myself.

“Hmm...Gerard.”

“Yes, my king?”

I then sent a telepathic message to the knight, who was rocking his sleeping grandchild on his lap. I *really* didn't want to be reminded of it, but there was no choice but to ask him to tap into that talent he had for entertaining crowds, which he had displayed so well back in the Village of Elves.

::Understood, my king::

After passing Ruka to Rion, who had just returned, Gerard walked out into the center of the space that had served as the ring. In his arms was a wooden platform, which he set on the ground and immediately stepped onto. He cleared his throat once.

“Come now, everyone, what did you think of that exhibition match between Sera and Brutal Beast?! It sure looked real, don't you think?!”

He launched into his speech and continued to talk and talk. I had asked him to make it seem like the fight had been a fixed match. After all, if there was no way to hide what had happened, we could at least change how the event was perceived.

“WHAT?! That was all an act?!”

“It was so fast, I couldn't see anything at all! Damn, man, Rank S adventurers sure are incredible!”

“S-See, Clare? It really *was* arranged by Kelvin. So please spare me already...”

“Oh my. So, it was a program for the feast after all. Sure could have fooled me!”

Well, the acting was pretty much true to life. But anyway, payment for the table that we pulverized...ugh, I don't think Clare-san would accept it if we tried to reimburse her for the commotion as well. Right! Let's just pay for everything in one lump sum and pad it a little! We'll even include a bit more for Uld-san's treatment costs!

“I'm sorry for springing it on you out of the blue! As an apology, I'll be footing the bill for everything today. Tomorrow is the all-important promotion ceremony and related match. Drink as much as you want tonight, everyone, and go nuts!”

“HELL YEAH!!”

The loudest shout of the night rocked the building. There wasn't anyone who didn't like free drinks. And the more they drank, the more that would go into the Fairy's Song's books. That would make it easier for me to sneak Clare the extra money. *All right, now everything on this side has been resolved too!*

Ema wore a confused expression. “U-Um, why would you go to such trouble for us? What do you get out of this?”

“Well, can I ask one thing of you guys?”

Wariness immediately filled Ema and Kokudori's faces. *Don't worry, it's not like I'm going to ask for anything unreasonable. It's an entirely wholesome request.*

"Sylvia, please go all out during tomorrow's match."

"Go all out?"

"Yep. That's all I want."

"Um...how is that connected to you, though?"

"That — oh, sorry, looks like my friend's back. Ask any of the other adventurers here; they'll tell you. Later, then!"

"Wait, what?" Ema cried. "You can't just —"

But Sera had just returned from the arena, which was now occupied by Gerard. The red in her eyes was a bit fainter, but they seemed slightly teary instead.

Of all the issues to be resolved this evening, this was the most herculean task. Everything that I wanted to say to Sylvia and her side had already been said. I couldn't afford to pay them any more attention.



"C'mon, Sera, cheer up already. Please?"

"Hmph! Like I care!"

After Clare set up a new table for us in place of the one that had been broken, we resumed our drinking. Not alcohol, of course, but juice. We were drinking juice.

Sera had finally gotten to the point where she would at least speak to us. Immediately after the fight she had thrown herself over the table and refused to say a word. The rest of us tried everything we could to restore her humor, and it was only after I very, very tenderly patted her head for fifteen minutes straight and promised to go fishing with her that she started to show some improvement.

This sure takes me back to when we first met her. It was quite the undertaking getting her to stop crying back then too.

"Sheesh, I couldn't give you the present, and a weird guy appeared out of the blue, and...ARGH, everything's gone so wrong!"

"Good job going easy on him, though, Sera-nee. You know, my heart was literally in my throat," Rion said as she used her homemade chopsticks to pick out pieces of bone with some meat left on them and pass them to Alex, who was camping out in her shadow.

"And I'm more than happy to receive presents any time," I added. "In fact, you can give it to me right now."

"I don't want to now. It's not the right mood anymore."

"That's...well, fair enough."

We were currently sharing our table too, which didn't help. As for who we were sharing it with...

“So good...this is so good!”

“Oh, come on, Sylvia, you’re getting sauce all around your mouth.”

“Nn...thank you, Ema.”

“Mh-hmm, you’re welcome.”

Sylvia and Ema. Around the time when Clare was preparing a new table for us, Ruka had completely conked out, so Gerard left to take her home. Consequently, we’d ended up with two empty seats at our table. I’d eventually folded at the sight of Sylvia staring like an abandoned kitten and agreed to let her and Ema join us. We got to talking, and it didn’t take long before we had opened up to each other quite a bit. *And all this right after I’d said goodbye because I couldn’t afford to pay them any more attention! Talk about a quick reunion.*

Ariel and Kokudori had gone ahead to their inn, taking Nagua with them. According to Ema, the Adventurer’s Guild had already arranged lodging for them, but they’d arrived too late and missed dinner. Most outdoor stalls were already closed at this time, and because of my ceremony, the taverns were chock-full. Unable to bear Sylvia’s pitiful hungry look any longer, Nagua had decided to force a random group to yield their seats. But for some reason, instead of going after hoodlums or punks, he’d come over to pick a fight with us.

“Still, why didn’t you just tell us you’re Sylvia’s opponent for tomorrow?” Ema asked with a slight pout.

“I did consider it, but...” *It’s something that everyone else in the tavern already knew, and I wanted to focus on Sera instead of fielding follow-up questions.*

“So...Nagua was up against a party member of the new Rank S adventurer. Now it makes sense that he lost. Oh, no, I’m not blaming you or anything. The fault is his for misjudging your companion’s strength and picking a losing fight.”

“Grr...” Sera growled, glaring at them in a clear display of hostility. She was still openly wary of our new acquaintances.

“Come on, Sera, leave them alone already. Sylvia’s promised to go all-out in tomorrow’s match, and that’s what matters, right?”

“I mean...if you say so, Kelvin.”

“And there you have it. Good luck to both of us tomorrow, Sylvia.” *Oh boy, I can hardly wait.*

“I don’t mind, but why?”

“We can’t die during the match, right? Getting to fight someone powerful with absolutely no risk is a priceless opportunity. It would be such a waste to not take full advantage of it.”

As Sylvia stuffed her cheeks with a spaghetti dish called Napolitan, a question mark seemed to appear over her head. *Does she not understand this thrill and exhilaration? What a pity. Truly.*

“I don’t really get it, but...I just have to go all-out during the fight, right? Sure.”

Ema looked at Sylvia with concern. “Don’t go overboard, okay?”

“Ahaha, good for you, Kel-nii.”

“Thank you for waiting,” Efil said, emerging from the kitchen with seconds for Sylvia and Melfina. “Here are your Napolitans.”

As it turned out, Sylvia was also a big eater. She wasn’t on Melfina’s level, but what she could pack away was still rather impressive considering her build was more like Efil’s.

And speaking of Melfina, she hasn’t said a word since Sylvia and Ema joined our table. Am I imagining it, or has she started eating faster? Is she feeling competitive about this?

“Oh right, you haven’t met yet,” I noted, quickly introducing Efil to our new acquaintances.

“So, you are Kelvin-san’s maid, and you made these dishes y—hold on, why’re you working here as a waitress, then?”

“The proprietress, Clare-san, is my cooking mentor. I’m simply helping her out in the kitchen today.”

I smiled proudly. “The Torajian cuisine that you just had was also made by her!”

“Very nice!” Ema complimented. “It was absolutely delicious, Efil-san. Strangely, I even started tearing up —”

Sylvia suddenly grabbed Efil’s hands.

What’s she doing?

“Um, hi!”

“Y-Yes, hello. How may I help you?”

“Please give me your autograph!”

That day, Efil earned herself a new fan.



The celebration had concluded without further mishap, and Efil, Sera, Rion, Melfina, and I were on our way back home. My legs and hips had significantly recovered, at least to the point where I could walk on my own. After all, I couldn’t very well lean on my maid indefinitely. Efil did look a bit disappointed about that, though.

“Once we started talking, it turns out they’re pretty nice people,” Melfina commented.

I looked at her pointedly. “Once ‘we’ started talking? You were stuffing your face the whole time.”

“Well, I’ll admit they weren’t as bad as I first thought,” Sera conceded. “But the same can’t be said for the dog person.”

Sera had eventually gotten to the point where she was able to talk to Sylvia and Ema normally. *Her fists might still fly when she sees Nagua again, but that’s none of my concern.*

“Um, Master, was my signature good enough? It was my first time doing that.”

“Sylvia seemed happy with it, which is all that matters, right? At least, that’s what I told myself when I was asked for an autograph once.”

It was, what, when I’d just been promoted to Rank A, I think? I can’t remember who asked for it, though.

“Thank you for teaching me how to write, Master. And to think I barely knew how to read when we were in Toraj...”

“Kel-nii taught you? But I knew how to read and write the language here straight away.”

“I assume transmigrators learn it automatically. It was the same for me when I arrived.”

“Mhm, it’s a bit like an after-sales service we provide to transmigrators for quality of life purposes. It’d be quite a struggle not knowing a word of the local language after being flung into a whole new world.”

We bantered for a while longer until we reached the gate to our estate. *Oh right, I still haven’t fixed the guard golems that Prettia half demolished. Guess I’ll have to redirect the golems stationed inside the house to gate duty for a while.*

“Welcome home, everyone,” Ellie said as she emerged through the front door. “I’m truly sorry for the trouble Ruka caused. I will scold her properly when she wakes up tomorrow.”

I waved a hand. “As long as she doesn’t do it again, it’s fine. Gerard quite enjoyed looking after her tonight.”

“Gerard-sama is far too kind to us.”

“Master, I don’t believe you’ve had your bath yet,” Efil said, turning to me. “Would you like one now?”

Oh, she’s right. All I did was cast Clean on myself. Mm, I think I have regained enough energy to take one now. “Yes, please. I’d like to have a good sleep tonight.”

“Understood, Master.”

Well! Tomorrow’s the promotion ceremony, finally. And, more importantly, the practice match with Sylvia that I’ve been looking forward to so much. I’ll also need to make contact with the Oracle, Colette. It’s going to be a long day. Let’s have a bath and go straight to bed.



The next day, we made our way to the enormous multipurpose square located in the center of the city, where large-scale festivals and celebrations were always held. A special venue had been set up just for the event, with the area for the ceremony being a central carpeted pathway lined with chairs for VIPs and, farther off, extra space for

common guests to observe from.

Damn, something of this scale was done in four days' time? I guess that goes to show how incredibly powerful different skills can be.

"Oh, hey, Kelvin! You're already here!"

"Good morning, Ange. I'll be in your care today."

"Ahaha, what an honor it is being relied on by our brand new Rank S adventurer! Leave it to me; I've got you covered!"

The arrangement was that Ange would be by my side for the entire day, operating as my attendant, guiding me where I needed to go and providing general support where necessary. Among those who worked at the Parth Adventurer's Guild, I was closest to her. Maybe choosing her for the task had been Rio's way of being considerate.

"Well, since you're all here, we might as well go over the schedule. It's a bit early, but it won't hurt," Ange said as she took out several sheets of paper from her shoulder pouch and passed them around to us. "The ceremony begins at 10 am. You are free to do whatever you want till then, but it'd be a great help if you could be backstage ahead of time. The guild has prepared formal wear for each of you, so please change into those in your respective rooms."

"Do we *have* to wear the formal outfits? I thought I'd just wear the same thing I'll be in for the match." *I've already put on my favorite black robe, Astarte's Embrace, to pump myself up and everything.*

"I'm sorry. It's not like there's a set rule or anything, but our guildmaster got weirdly fired up about the whole thing and ordered custom outfits for all of you. I don't know if it's any consolation, but these were created according to official guidelines, so you'll be able to wear them for any other guild-related ceremonies in the future. We'll let you keep them for free, so could you bear with it for now? Wait, where's Mel-san?"

"Mel-nee isn't feeling well today, so she can't make it. She's been under the weather since yesterday."

"Really? I'm sorry to hear that. I'll need to visit her later on."

Rion had excused Mel's absence on the grounds of illness, but of course that was a big, fat lie. Our goddess was currently tucked away within my magic pool. As we had discussed, it was a necessary countermeasure against the possibility of her bumping into Colette or other important figures from Deramis. I wasn't sure if there was a genuine need to be *this* careful, but there was a high chance of Colette recognizing her, so it was best to be safe.

I guess the Oracle is living up to her position and the blessing she received. Good on her.

::I mean, yes, but, that's not exactly....::

Not exactly what?

::I...think you'll get it when you meet her yourself.::

You've been a bit weird since this morning. You sure you're not unwell for real?

Ange continued to give us the rundown, oblivious to our telepathic conversation. "Once the ceremony is over, there'll be time for lunch, and then it'll be the practice match that everyone's looking forward to. To be blunt, most of the visitors from other countries are likely more interested in that part than the ceremony itself. These occasions are pretty much the only opportunity most have to see Rank S adventurers duking it out, after all."

"Kelvin, make sure you win, okay?" Sera commanded. "I won't forgive you if you lose!"

"No need to tell me. I'll be deadly serious about winning."

Ange whispered in my ear, "Um, is it just me, or is Sera-san really worked up today?"

"Ah, y'know, stuff happened yesterday. She's been like this all morning; don't worry about it."

"I see. Guess you've got a lot on your plate! If you ever need a helping hand, come find me!"

"Thanks, Ange. That really means a lot." *She's so great. I hope we can stay such good friends in the future.*

"Master, we still have a little over two hours before the ceremony begins. What should we do?"

"Ah, we came a bit too early. Should we just find somewhere to spend —"

"Well, I'll be! If it isn't Kelvin-chan and Gerard-sama!" a rough voice exclaimed from behind us. I didn't even have to turn around to know who it was; Gerard's immediate look of anxiety beside me left no room for doubt.

"Hey there, Prettia."

The speaker was, of course, Goldiana Prettiana. He was dressed to the nines and sporting even more makeup than when we had seen him last. *So, this is him at his most dolled up? Damn.*

"Your ceremony is finally happening! I'll be supporting you from the shadows. Go break a leg!"

"That's heartening to hear. Thanks!"

"Still, there's some time before it kicks off, isn't there? I'm planning to visit my favorite café. I wanted to read a book over a cup of morning tea, but would you dearies like to join me? How about you, Gerard dear?"

Prettia winked — with the sideways peace sign and all — and sent a heart flying our way. *This is obviously meant for Gerard, so I can't very well get in the way. Let's dodge it.*

::It's not mine, either!::

Aww, even Gerard avoided the heart. Look at him being all shy.

Joking aside, I quite liked the café idea. I also thought I might get to hear some interesting information from Prettia, so I decided to take him up on the offer.

“We don’t have any other plans, so, sure. If you don’t mind having us, that is.”

“Oh my, really?!”

“Ange, what about y— what’s wrong?” I had turned to look at Ange and found her staring in shock.

“K-Kelvin, th-th-this person is ‘Peach Ogre’ Goldiana Prettiana from the Western Continent! When exactly did you two get to know each other?!”

“Didn’t you get the report on what happened with Sera and the others?”

“With Sera-san? Are you referring to the new dungeon that Rion-chan reported? What does that have to do with Goldiana-san?”

Hmm? It wasn’t Prettia who contacted the guild?

“Oh, I’m sorry, Kel-nii. I guess I never did get to go into the details. It was me who made the report to the guild about the new dungeon and the monsters we encountered. I was planning to bring Prettia-chan’s name up as well, but he kept insisting he didn’t want his share of the reward. We parted ways in front of the guild, with me and Gramps left to make the report as he ran off to our house by himself.”

“Ahh, so that’s why you got home a bit later.” *And if Prettia was charging at our place on his own, it makes a lot more sense that our golems attacked him.*

“Oh, how embarrassing! Silly me, getting ahead of myself and everything!” Prettia blushed and stuck out his tongue.

Dammit, why can’t it be the girls in my party striking that pose?!

“You’re such a scatterbrain sometimes, Prettia-chan!” Rion laughed.

“In any case! Off to the café we go, dearies! We can talk there!”



After killing some time at Prettia’s favorite café, our group returned to the main venue. Prettia left us in front of the entrance and made his way over to the VIP seating as the rest of us headed for our private lounge.

“That was actually a pretty good place with a nice atmosphere,” Sera said.

I nodded. “I know, right? I’d expected something more...out there, but I’ll admit Prettia has pretty good tastes.” *Aside from his fashion sense, that is. But let’s move on. It’s time to don our formal clothing.*

“Here are your outfits,” Ange said as she passed separate packages

to each of us.

The outfits were all of unique design, with mine being a black three-piece suit that looked more like something a noble would wear. It had fancy detailing, and there was even a brooch bearing the wing symbol that represented the Parth Adventurer's Guild for me to pin on later.

Efil, Sera, and Rion all had dresses tailored to reflect their own personalities. Guild staff had apparently dedicated numerous all-nighters to these designs even before the ceremony had been officially announced. Just like my suit, the dresses bore the Parthian wing. Ranking a solid A, they were surprisingly high-quality outfits.

“And this is the one for Mel-san. Please pass it on to her later.”

“Gotcha. Thanks, I think she'll love it.”

::Efil! This outfit doesn't have holes for my wings and tail!::

::Not a problem. Clo-chan is holding onto a set of my sewing tools for me, so I can fix it easily enough.::

Sera seemed rather flustered, but it was clear that Efil was on top of things, as always. Gerard had also received a white mantle emblazoned with the Parthian wing, but due to the way his Self Modification skill worked, equipping it would mean losing Crimson Mantle forever. And, similarly, after putting this one on, he wouldn't be able to take it off again.

What should we do?

Gerard cleared his throat awkwardly. “Ange, I'm sorry to say this, but I have personal reasons for why I can't wear this. May I go out in my current gear?”

“Oh, you're fine, Gerard-san. We know you never take off your armor, so the Guildmaster's already given up on the idea.”

“I...see? Great, thanks.”

A small chuckle bubbled up in my throat. *Gerard, I think they might have misunderstood you somehow.*

“Kelvin, your changing room is that way. The female changing room is over here. I'll come to fetch you all when time comes. As I said at the café, the only thing you'll have to do during the ceremony is say ‘Yes,’ so don't stress about it. Well then, I'll be back in a few!”

Ange headed out, but not before hurriedly pushing me into my own changing room.

“Fine...I'll get changed, then, I suppose.”

::Honey, is that disappointment I hear in your voice?::



Even before the start of the ceremony, numerous VIPs from abroad and various famous adventurers were already settled into their seats. The area for the other spectators was all but overflowing as

well. It was harder to find a spot that *wasn't* occupied.

“Looks like the ceremony is actually happening. Remember the guest of honor never showed up last time? I still have no idea what she looks like.”

“Come, now, don't say that. Sylvia-dono is the one who'll be serving as the opponent in the practice match this afternoon. So, we'll not only be seeing both of them in person, we'll even have the honor of spectating their fight. That's enough to make up for last year in my book.”

Several conversations within the VIP area, most of them among the nobles, had already turned towards the upcoming match. Some had attended in hopes of attracting the new talent, some were there to gauge the threat posed by these new superpowers. There were as many intentions as there were people present, but at the root of it all was the power suggested by the Rank S designation. Authorities from many countries had scrambled to get to Parth as soon as the Adventurer's Guild had announced the event. The occasion was just that important.

As expected, the place is fully packed. I must make sure to bear witness to Gerard-sama's gallant figure!

Of course, there were *some* viewers who were entertaining impure thoughts, but they were rather in the minority.

“Silence, please.”

The clamor of the crowd abruptly died down as Rio's voice reverberated through the venue. All eyes turned towards the stage where he stood.

“Thank you for waiting, ladies and gentlemen. The ceremony will now begin. On this auspicious day, the man who is to be promoted to the distinguished Rank of S is Kelvin, an adventurer affiliated with the Parth Adventurer's Guild.”

Whispers rose up in various places around the stands.

“It was only three months ago that Kelvin registered to be an adventurer. However, what he has achieved within this short period of time is extraordinarily impressive. After vanquishing the archdemon who made a sudden appearance in the vicinity of Parth, he, along with the Heroes of Deramis, went on to take down the infamous bandit gang Black Wind. While staying in the Country of Water, he accepted a request from the Queen of Toraj to subjugate the terror that was a Rank S evil dragon. Only a week ago, he successfully saved the Village of Elves in Gaun from an unwarranted invasion launched by the Mixed Monster Order of Trycen. We of the guild confirm to the world that Kelvin does indeed possess sufficient power to be deemed worthy of the rank of ‘S.’ As such, we hereby express our official approval of his promotion.”

When Rio finished speaking, spotlights swiveled onto sections of the stage to his left and right. On one side was the national flag of Toraj, on the other the national flag of Gaun, and before each flag was a crystal ball.

“I am Tsubaki Fujiwari, Queen of Toraj. I acknowledge the eligibility of the adventurer Kelvin.”

“I am Leonhart Gaun, King of Gaun. I also acknowledge the eligibility of the adventurer Kelvin.”

The voices of the two heads of state emanated loud and clear from the crystal balls — magical items of communication.

Rio raised both hands dramatically. “And there we have the acknowledgment from two monarchs of countries on the Eastern Continent. With that, Kelvin’s promotion is formally confirmed. Let it be known that this promotion to Rank S is the fastest in the history of the Adventurer’s Guild!”

Cheering and applause went up in a roar from the spectators, the majority of whom were Parthians. Kelvin was the first ever Parthian adventurer to reach Rank S, and they couldn’t have been prouder. A few of the nobles in the VIP section looked slightly taken back, but there was no time to dwell on trivial matters.

“Now, without further ado, let’s have today’s guest of honor join us on stage! Kelvin, come on up!”

The five people who had been on standby at the far end of the central pathway began to walk forward. At the front of the group was Kelvin, looking smart in his black suit. Huddled closely around him were Efil in an elegant green dress, Sera in a fiery red dress, and Rion in an immaculate white dress. Taking up the rear guard was Gerard who, despite not having worn the formal mantle, still exuded an overwhelming aura of gravity thanks to his awe-inspiring armor. The figure of him gallantly protecting his lord’s back was the ultimate display of nobility.

“How beautiful...”

“Are those girls his party members?!”

“There’s no way, he’s just hired them for sho— what?! They really are?!”

“Gerard-sama...so wonderful!”

Understandably, it was the three beauties who attracted the most attention. They almost never wore makeup in their everyday life; their natural features were stunning enough. Today, however, Ange had given them a light, dignified makeover that served to offer a slightly more mature impression. Furthermore, they were wearing the bespoke gowns that the guild staff had poured their hearts and souls into. Even the nobles who were used to seeing such finery at their social gatherings could not look away. Sighs of admiration went up

throughout the crowd.

“Our efforts have finally paid off!”

“I knew it...our judgment was right!”

The staff members who had been part of this side project exchanged high-fives and wiped tears from their eyes as the newer employees looked at them with a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

“Seriously, what are you guys doing? I mean, sure, you did do a great job, b— wait, did they just faint?!”

According to Ange’s account, the ones who collapsed from the exhaustion of consecutive all-nighters did so with extremely satisfied expressions on their faces.

After walking the length of the carpeted pathway, Kelvin left the rest of his companions at the bottom of the staircase as he alone climbed up to where Rio was waiting. Naturally, this caused the spectators to shift their attention to him.

“That’s Kelvin-dono, the fastest-rising adventurer in history? You, make sure to burn every detail into your brain for the report to send back home. And we need to attempt to make contact with him somehow.”

“So young? And he doesn’t look all that distinctive, does he?”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I kind of like what I see. At the very least, it seems like he knows how to hold himself.”

The reactions of the nobles were diverse, with some feeling that he fell short in comparison to his female companions, some trying to gauge his potential, and a wide variety of ulterior motives, opinions, and speculations in between. At the same time, the cheers of support from the throngs of commoners rose by another decibel.

They’re probably thinking all sorts of things about me, aren’t they? Ugh, please let it be the afternoon already, Kelvin thought with an inward sigh as he felt all of the unapologetic gazes directed towards his back. Even so, he remained mindful about keeping up his manners and giving off the best impression he could. Hardly any of those watching imagined that his head was already filled with thoughts of the coming match.

Upon reaching the spot next to Rio, Kelvin turned around to face the crowd. It was there, at that moment, that a new Rank S adventurer was born.



“I’m so tired...”

After the ceremony finished and I had dealt with the hangers-on, I finally had time to grab some lunch. Food stalls had been set up everywhere around the square, and we were circling them and trying

to decide where to eat when, of all people, we bumped into Sylvia and Ema.

“Good job.”

“I, for one, think you did well.”

They invited us to join their table, and we accepted. There were already several empty plates stacked up next to the silver-haired girl, but I was so used to the sight by now — thanks to a certain gluttonous goddess I knew — that I barely noticed. In fact, I thought the stack a bit unimpressive, to be honest.

“Where’s the rest of your party?” I asked as I sat down.

“Kokudori is off on his own. He’s probably still somewhere on the grounds.”

“Nagua still can’t move. Ariel is looking after him.”

Sera snorted softly. “Maybe I should have given him one more punch.”

I couldn’t help blurting out a “Now, now” in response.

“He might have been able to take it,” Sylvia said, bringing a finger to her face thoughtfully. “Or maybe not. Pretty hard to tell, actually. We need to train him more.”

Damn smooth way of handling Sera’s jab. This girl’s going places.

It was at this point that a server came to our table, so we each ordered whatever we felt like. For some reason, the guy was so nervous that he was practically shaking in his shoes. *Why’s he acting like that? Is today his first day on the job?*

“Silvie, how do you feel now, with it almost being time for the fight?” asked Rion.

Sister dear, your quickness at making friends never ceases to amaze me. You’re already on a nickname basis with Sylvia?

“I’m not sure why, but I feel great today. As promised, I’ll go all out.”

Whoa, I think I can almost see some sort of aura of motivation surrounding her.

Ema brought a hand to her forehead. “She’s been like this ever since last night. Sylvia, are you sure you didn’t eat anything strange?”

“I’ve only eaten what you have,” Sylvia answered. She bobbed her head at Efil. “Oh, right, Efil-san. Your food last night was delicious. I was so moved. I’ll treasure your signature forever.”

Efil lowered her head in response. “I’m glad you liked it. Please come eat at the restaurant again.”

::If she had Efil’s cooking, that means she received a buff from it, didn’t she?: Sera remarked through the Network.

My eyes widened slightly at the realization. *Sylvia, if you check your Status, you’ll find a wonderful surprise waiting for you. But then again, I have the same buff, so we’re even. Let’s have ourselves a wonderful*

fight!



Next to the area where the morning's program had been held was a simplistic coliseum that would be the stage for the demo match. There was a circular platform in the center surrounded by tiers of spectator seats, and the ornamentation of the structure was surprisingly elaborate for a place that had been set up for the sake of a single fight.

The match was just about to start, and the entire venue was absolutely swarming with people. Every seat was filled, and vendors were already out making their rounds. Excitement hung thick in the air.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the exhibition match between our newest Rank S adventurers will be starting any moment now! Your commentator for the day is me, Ronove, official announcer from the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena!"

The voice of a female cat beastkin rang out loud and clear from a square box dangling around the neck of a gigantic bird flying above the stands. The box was a magic item often used in the arenas at Gaun, which served the purpose of magnifying the speaker's voice. As such, those who lived in Gaun, as well as those who had prior experience attending fights, were quite familiar with the device. In contrast, those encountering it for the first time were understandably surprised. And there were a lot of startled faces today, as this was the first time the contraption had ever been used in Parth. Many of those present seemed to be doubting their own ears.

"Oh, wow, that's a pretty interesting invention. Have you ever seen it before, Sylvia?"

"Mhm. When I visited an arena in Gaun. I don't like how it rings in my ears, though."

Sylvia and Kelvin had a bit of time before the match and were currently chatting on stage while they waited. The reason for the delay was...

"*Gulp, gulp, gulp...burp.* Phew, I finally managed to drink the whole thing. I'll be casting the spell on you now, Kelvin-san."

"Uh...yeah, take all the time you need."

The Oracle of Deramis, Colette, was struggling a bit with getting through the various spells that she needed to perform. She had started off with the one that would prevent instant death on Sylvia, but doing so had almost emptied her MP pool, causing her knees to buckle. The two clerics standing by for this very purpose caught her with perfect timing, and one of them passed her an MP potion. It was a rather sizable bottle, requiring some effort on her part to finish it off.

However, if she didn't drink it, her MP wouldn't recover fast enough. If she was to fulfill her ceremonial duties, she had no option but to drink.

Recovery potions were absolute must-haves when adventuring, as they were a sure way to top up one's HP and MP quickly. However, they were not suitable for use during combat. There was variation in how much they could recover and how they tasted based on the ingredients used, but what they all had in common was their volume and the fact that the user needed to drink the entire bottle for the potion to take effect. The only kind of adventurer who had that much time in the middle of a battle would be a novice on their first day, or so the saying went. If an adventurer desperately needed to recover on the spot, it fell to the other party members to protect the one drinking the elixir.

I wanted to talk to her before the match, but it's going to have to wait, Kelvin thought. *I'll have to pick a time when she doesn't seem so at the end of her rope.*

After casting the same spell on Kelvin, Colette collapsed once again, was caught by her attendants once again, and, of course, was passed another MP potion...once again.

"You're almost done, Oracle! All that's left is to erect the barrier!"

"Y-Yes...I'm almost done...I've got this..."

With a pale face, she raised the next bottle to her lips. As Kelvin mentally cheered her on, Ronove continued to keep the audience engaged with her lighthearted chatter.

"Today's stage was created by the famous artisan Caesar-san and his apprentices. We asked him for a comment, and, I quote, 'We poured our heart into making a stage that would never break!' From the look of it, plenty of care was directed towards the decorations as well!"

A section of the stands filled with solemn-looking men nodded.

"And today, joining me as a guest is none other than the Rank S adventurer known as Peach Ogre, Goldiana Prettiana-san! Goldiana-san, I'll be counting on you!"

"It's my pleasure to be here. And feel free to call me 'Prettia-chan,' dearie."

"Right off the bat, let me clarify, I really will be counting on you because I won't be providing commentary after all!"

Many of the spectators did a double take at the brazen dereliction of duty.

"Mhmm, same as always, eh?"

"That's right! I'm proud of the portfolio of matches that I've commentated on, but my eyes can't keep up with the movements of Rank S adventurers. I wouldn't have the slightest clue what's going

on! But those of you who're listening, don't worry. Goldiana-san here is more than capable of explaining things when the need arises!"

"I wonder about this every time, but what are you here for, then, dear?"

"This voice magnification item is on loan from our own arena, so me being here is a sort of side benefit that I get to enjoy. But hey, at least I'll do the emceeing!"

As if to interrupt the banter, a bluish-white barrier suddenly flashed into being. Once it had expanded far enough to completely cover the stage, its color faded, leaving it transparent.

Panting heavily, the Oracle said, "With this, the...preparations are finished, so...I pray that the two of y— *burp*, that the two of you have a great match..." and stepped down from the stage, hands clapped tightly over her mouth.

Poor girl. I hope she doesn't throw up, Kelvin thought earnestly. Potions took effect the moment the entire bottle was finished, so there was no issue with vomiting the contents back up afterwards.

"Looks like the preparations are done. Well then, let's go over the rules one last time!"

"Take it away, Ronove-chan."

"The match will be conducted on top of the circular stage. The condition for winning is to either force the Oracle's protection spell to activate, or to make the other person fall off the stage! The surrounding barrier will block all magical attacks, but living beings can pass through it with no problem, so keep that in mind! Everyone in the stands, sit back and enjoy the spectacle. Just like me, you'll most likely have no idea what you're seeing!"

"Has anyone ever told you that you have a rather sharp tongue, Ronove-chan?"

Ronove suddenly dropped her voice to a whisper. "This is just between you and me, but the nobles who act like they know what's going on actually can't see anything, either. I bet their bodyguards are secretly explaining everything to them as things progress."

In a similar low voice, Goldiana chided her, "Good ladies know to keep such secrets to themselves!"

"AHM! Well then, folks, let's talk about the rules for equipment and items next! It's short and simple: all equipment is allowed, regardless of rank, but all usable items are banned!"

"That's right! We have already inspected everything that each fighter currently has on their person."

Kelvin and Sylvia had had to submit applications detailing what they would be using during the fight, and the organizers had inspected the two of them based on those lists before they'd even gotten up onto the stage. Needless to say, both had been cleared without issue. Just

for today, Kelvin had left behind the Clotho clone that he normally kept on his person at all times.

“Aaaaaand that’s it for the rules! Do both fighters understand them? I’m sure you do, right? So, without further ado, get to your starting positions! Quickly!”

Nobody understood the need for the sudden rush.

“Let’s have a good match, Sylvia. Fair and square.”

“Got it. And I know, I’ll go all out.”

The two exchanged a friendly handshake and moved apart.

“Look at that sportsmanlike handshake between the two contestants! Will we be seeing a fair and aboveboard fight today? What do you think, Goldiana-san?”

“It’s my first time watching either of them fight as well, so your guess is as good as mine. I suppose we’ll just have to see.”

Both adventurers turned to walk to their respective starting positions.

“On the east side of the arena is the adventurer who was promoted just this morning, Keeeeelvin-san! He’s wearing a black robe and his weapon appears to be a staff! What kind of fighting style will he be showing us today?!”

“You’ve got this, Kel-nii!”

“Make sure you win, Kelvin!”

“I’ll be praying for you, Master!”

Voices expressing support for Kelvin rang out loudly from the reserved seats in the very first row.

“And most importantly, which of his female companions is his favorite?!”

Why’re you asking me that now?! Kelvin thought, somewhat perplexed, feeling the pointed stares of the non-Parthian men on his back.

“On the west side of the ring is the Rank S adventurer who was promoted last, Syyyyylvia-san! In sharp contrast to her opponent, her base color is white and silver, she’s wearing light armor, and her weapon...appears to be a sabre! Sylvia-san did not show up for her own promotion ceremony, which means we know absolutely nothing about the strength of either contestant! This is going to be one interesting showdown!”

“It’s almost time, Ronove-chan.”

“My bad! All right then, let’s kick this match off. Are both contestants ready?!”

The cheering abruptly died down.

Kelvin raised his staff, the butt resting on his shoulder.

Sylvia adopted a fencing pose, the tip of her sword pointing straight forward.

“Ready...BEGIN!”

BOOM!

As soon as the starting signal was given, half the stage turned into a quagmire and a pillar of air pressure crashed down with Kelvin's simultaneous casting of Contaminated Mud Bind and Air Pressure. Sylvia found her legs immediately sinking into the bottomless bog as a heavy weight threatened to crush her.

Even so, she was unfazed. There was a sharp exhale, then she charged straight through the swamp. Her sword flashed once.

CLANG!

Sabre clashed with scythe in the split second that Sylvia passed Kelvin's side.

“Oh, I'm going to enjoy this,” Kelvin murmured as he raised a hand to the fresh cut on his cheek. There was a faint flash of light, then he brought his hand back down to reveal that the wound was already gone.

She used earth, wind, and light. Three elements all at once, wow. What's more...

“You look like you're having fun,” Sylvia noted.

“Oh, you have no idea. Everything that I've done for the sake of this match...it's finally paying off,” Kelvin replied, his face filled with appreciation for his opponent.

“I see. As promised, I'm going to kill you now.”

“Um, Goldiana-san, what happened just there?”

“Kelvin-chan tried to use air pressure to slam Sylvia-chan into a poisonous quagmire, but she got out of it by freezing the patch of ground she was standing on. Then she made a beeline for Kelvin-chan and tried to drive her sword through his right eye. At that speed, her sword would have gone straight out to the other side, impaling his head.”

“His eye?! She has such a pretty face, and yet the first thing she does is go for her opponent's eye?!”

“Looks like Kelvin-chan dodged it by tilting his head. Then he used his scythe — is that a special function of his staff? Hmm, no matter. He attempted to use the scythe to cut off her head.”

“Her head?! He looked like such a nice guy during the ceremony, and...am I seeing right? Is he *smiling*?!”

“They both have Colette-chan's spell protecting them, so there's no danger. And she managed to dodge it by crouching d—”

Ronove interrupted Goldiana's explanation, shouting, “This match is far dirtier than I expected!”



“NOOOO, MY STAGE!”

“Calm down, Boss!”

The sight of the stage being eroded into a muddy mess by Kelvin's Contaminated Mud Bind evoked a scream that came from the very depths of Caesar's soul. His apprentices had to hold him back as he attempted to jump down onto the stage in his frenzy.

“As you can see, half of the stage has been entirely ruined and the fight has only just begun. I've heard that Caesar-san visited the mines himself to procure materials of the greatest purity and best quality. Yet his efforts have been for nothing, with the only record broken here being the speed at which his prized creation was utterly *destroyed*! Unlike in Gaun, where most fights are based on brawn and physical prowess, it is common to use magic in other countries. Perhaps he should take that into consideration for his next work!”

“Dearie, if he succeeds in making a stage that cannot be destroyed even by magic, every country will be making him offers. But this is hardly the time for that. Keep your eyes on the stage — the next exchange is coming!”

Just as Goldiana said, Kelvin and Sylvia were about to unleash their next moves.

“Obsidian Edge!”

“Wintry Expanse!”

Behind Kelvin's back floated four four-meter-long black swords fashioned from the material of the stage itself. Kelvin was hovering high up in the air thanks to the Fly spell. He whistled.

“Talk about a close call. If I'd been slower by a split second, you would've had my legs.”

“Says the person who tried to crush me into a quagmire.”

“Touché.”

The stage that Sylvia was standing on was no longer a bottomless bog. Instead, the whole thing — quagmire and all — had been converted into a huge block of ice. In fact, the entire ground inside Colette's barrier was now Sylvia's territory.

A Rank A Blue Magic spell, huh? If I'm right, everything that touches the ground would be encased in ice instantaneously. That's problematic.

He put his thoughts on pause for a moment as he activated Analyze Eye.

Huh. First time I've seen someone's name shown in blue. As for her skills...

Sylvia (16 y/o, Female, Human, Magic Swordsman)

Level: 99

Title: Ice Princess

HP: 1,088/1,088

MP: 1,332/1,620

Strength: 472

Endurance: 316

Agility: 1,192 (+199)

Magic: 852

Luck: 749

Skills: Magic Armor (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank S), Blue Magic (Rank S), Presence Sensing (Rank A), Danger Detection (Rank A), Mind's Eye (Rank A), Army Command (Rank B), Teaching (Rank C), Riding (Rank C), Auto Healing (Rank S), Magic Attachment (Rank A), Hearty Eating (Rank A)

Passive Effects: Blessing of the Water Dragon King, Blessing of the Ice Dragon King, Concealment (Rank A), Cooking/Large AGI Increase (Rank S)

I've been maintaining Air Pressure on her this whole time, but she doesn't seem hampered by it in the least.

Ever since the start of the match, Kelvin had been using the most powerful version of Air Pressure that he was capable of, with the target being the entire stage. As proof of it, the frozen platform was slowly sinking into the ground below, with the sole exception being the area around Sylvia's feet.

Is this the effect of her Unique Skill, Magic Armor? Judging by the area that's not sinking, it likely protects her from most magical attacks. If so, she's the natural enemy of all mages.

After quickly sorting through his thoughts using Parallel Processing, Kelvin applied Vortex Edge to all four of his swords. Sylvia, however, was already moving by then.

"Geyser Cataract!"

The ice on the ground split apart as boiling water burst forth with the momentum of a waterfall, albeit an upside-down one. The jet of water — hot enough to burn someone and imbued with a significant amount of magic — threatened to shoot Kelvin out of the sky but was suppressed by Air Pressure instead.

"I've heard that the water from my spell is quite hot."

"I would imagine!"

At the same time, Kelvin brought all four swords together by their handles as if to form a giant shuriken. What he was now positioning in front of him looked less like a weapon than a shield.

"Spin."

The black swords began to rotate at high speed, repelling the incoming stream of boiling water. Thanks in part to Vortex Edge, the sword shuriken did not let so much as a drop get through. Instead, the deflected water collided with the domed barrier and simply disappeared.

While this was going on, Kelvin had sensed Sylvia's rapid ascent. Although his sight was largely obscured by Geyser Cataract, Presence

Sensing told him her exact position, so he threw a few Wind Shots and a flying slash her way. The slash was faster than the shots, bisecting the water screen as it passed. It looked like it was just about to make contact when...

“Hup.”

Through the gap that had opened in the curtain of water, Kelvin saw Sylvia easily dodge the flying slash and parry the powerful bursts of wind with her sword.

She sure is agile...

Just as she had evaded the large quagmire by freezing it over, she had secured footing for herself this time by freezing the boiling water at her feet. She was doing all of this so fast that it was only a matter of time before she reached Kelvin. She seemed to have gotten a fair amount of boiling water on her during the process, but unsurprisingly, it didn't affect her at all.

Kelvin showed no sign of moving, though. The reason for that was...

KA-BOOM!

The flying slash from Boreas Death Scythe that Sylvia had dodged had finally landed, cleaving straight through the block of ice (formerly the stage) and the ground underneath that was serving as the source of Geyser Cataract. With the eruption of water interrupted, Sylvia lost her footing and was left wide open.

Kelvin immediately broke his shuriken back into four swords and threw them forward like bullets, all of them flying at a speed that even a Rank A adventurer would have no hope of dodging while standing on solid ground. Although Obsidian Edges were indeed made with magic, they were, ultimately, merely swords that were incredibly tough. As such, the damage they dealt was much more physical than magical. It was Kelvin's hope that this would prove effective against Sylvia in spite of her resistance to magic.

Sylvia herself was warned by Danger Detection of the threat posed by the swords. If she took them head on, the wound would be severe, if not fatal. But despite the desperate situation, she did not have to stop and think about what to do. It would be more correct to say that her body automatically knew what it needed to do, thanks to her natural talent for battle.

Water jetted out from the silver-haired girl's right hand, the one that wasn't currently holding her weapon...not directed at Kelvin but to the side. In doing so, she managed to propel herself out of the way of the first Obsidian Edge, allowing it to fly by harmlessly. She then used the flat of the blade passing by as a step to climb even higher.

The moment her foot landed, an involuntary grunt of pain escaped her lips. Her feet were being torn apart by the Vortex Edge

enchantment on the sword, and she left bloody footsteps in her wake. After all, her Magic Armor provided a high resistance, not complete protection, and she was in direct contact with the spell. But be that as it may, she proceeded to jump onto the second sword, the third, and by the time she was hopping onto the fourth, she was right in Kelvin's face.

"This is the end."

Seen from up close, Sylvia's sabre was beautiful like a mirror, allowing Kelvin to catch a clear reflection of himself in the blade. It roared and took on a dangerous hue as it was thrust forward at a godly speed. Its target was his neck.

"Hm?" Sylvia found her sword stopped by an invisible force. *A wall? Something whirling?*

"'Helix Barrier is a spell that blocks both physical and magical spells alike' is how he described it, if I recall."

Kelvin's Boreas Death Scythe was on the verge of being swung. At the same time, Sylvia found the Obsidian Edges — once again reformed into a giant shuriken — quickly closing in on her from behind.

Kelvin's favorite robe, Astarte's Embrace, was imbued with many special characteristics. Among other things, it helped to decrease the MP cost of his spells, provided resistance against certain debuffs, and was tough enough to withstand strikes from famed swords forged by blacksmiths of renown.

The most noteworthy effect, however, was that it could deconstruct all magic that its wearer came into contact with. This included attacks, buffs, healing, and anything else that accidentally brushed by. The intention behind the spell and the process that led to the contact did not matter. As long as Kelvin touched a spell, the robe had the power to completely unravel its structure and pass that knowledge back to him. If he possessed compatible skills, he could easily learn to use the spell himself with a little bit of practice. If he wanted to, he could even put his own spin on the original.

Furthermore, from his experience in the fight against Clive, he had learned to perceive all spells that came into contact with his magic as being in contact with himself. Through Obsidian Edge, he had "stolen" Helix Barrier from Clive and added it to his own repertoire.

Helix Barrier was both a protective wall and a vicious helical wind that would mince anything that came near. Kelvin understood best how useful this spell was, having been on the receiving end of it. The only way to penetrate it was to use something like Efil's Blaze Arrow, which concentrated all of its destructive power into a single point. No halfhearted attack would leave a mark.

However, this barrier was the least of Sylvia's worries at the moment. In front of her, Kelvin was standing ready with Boreas Death Scythe, safely hidden behind his barrier, the corners of his mouth lifted in a grin. Behind her was the windmill of Obsidian Edges wreathed in Vortex Edge. And Sylvia herself had lost her balance from the recoil of her sword strike being deflected.

The audience, despite not fully understanding the situation, were straining their eyes in an effort to catch every detail of the exchange taking place high above them. In contrast, Sera, Goldiana, and anyone else who could follow along had all come to the same conclusion; namely, that the match had been decided. Sera nodded in satisfaction, Efil and Rion breathed sighs of relief, and Gerard and Goldiana mentally applauded Kelvin.

In the midst of all this, Sylvia's beautiful pupils were simply looking up at the clear, blue sky. There wasn't a single change in her expression.

Mm, exact height of the barrier confirmed.

The only thing on the girl's mind was how to kill her opponent.
"Glacial Meteor."



The moment the words left her mouth, a giant shadow fell over the entire venue. The spectators' jaws dropped in unison, and Kelvin felt something appear behind his back. As it happened, Sylvia's sword was at the perfect angle to show him a glimpse of a reflection.

"Hold on, you aren't...?!"

A massive comet loomed overhead. Large enough to crush the entire stage, it hung there in midair, barely fitting inside the barrier, threatening to plunge down at any moment.

"I confirmed using Geyser Cataract that this barrier goes pretty high up. Phew, using a Rank S spell is tiring..."

"You plan on killing us both?"

"Mmm...nuh-uh, I think I'll be fine."

Sylvia had the Blessing of the Ice Dragon King, which boosted the destructive power of all ice elemental damage she dished out and gave her protection against similar attacks. When pairing that with the effects of her Magic Armor, she might just make it out alive.

The same could not be said for Kelvin. Although he had Helix Barrier deployed, the impact of taking such a blow would likely be enough to activate Colette's magic. He couldn't just land, either — Geyser Cataract had destroyed the stage, which meant that Wintry Expanse could still be active. Exiting the barrier was the surest solution, but doing so would mean forfeiting the match.

I can cut through it with Boreas Death Scythe, but at this size, haphazardly cutting it would just generate a ton of smaller fragments that I'd still need to dodge. That only leaves me with one option —

"Arctic Aegis."

As if having read his thoughts, a shield of ice appeared in Sylvia's right hand. In contrast to Gerard's Dreadnought, this one was much smaller and looked a lot more maneuverable.

"Now all I need to do is endure this."

"You really are the best, Sylvia!"

As gravity started to pull his opponent back to the ground, Kelvin gave chase, bringing his scythe down. He had decided to finish her off before she could reach the ground.

I probably shouldn't let that scythe touch me. Hang in there, Sylvia thought as she thrust her sabre three times at the staff of Kelvin's weapon in quick succession to forcibly alter its trajectory. He continued to swing, and she continued to parry in the same way. The exchange was furious in its intensity, despite lasting only a few seconds.

She's keeping up with me even though she's in free fall and has no footing? This goes way beyond just being agile.

Kelvin knew better than anyone that he was at a disadvantage in

close-quarters combat. However, this was the sky, not the ground. He was using Fly to propel himself while Sylvia had nothing of the sort. The weapon mastery skills that they were respectively drawing on were at the same rank. The only difference, then, was their own potential, and that talent could not be measured with numbers and ranks. Kelvin could not be more impressed by his opponent's ability to successfully fend him off in spite of the circumstances.

It was Obsidian Edge that eventually tipped the scales, closing in on Sylvia from behind. The giant shuriken hit her flank and dug its way in, making muffled sounds of tearing and ripping as it went. Even the normally expressionless girl could not help but wince at this.

Still, it was not a fatal blow. The moment the blades made contact, she slammed Arctic Aegis against them. Rather than parrying, she simply brought the shield down hard. The impact broke several bones in her right hand and shattered the shield itself, but the fragments shone blue and froze the black swords.

“What?!”

“If I spent too long dealing with it, ugh...you would have cut me down.”

Despite the wound to her side, Sylvia's movements didn't slow in the slightest. Rather, Kelvin felt she was getting faster and faster, and this realization made him unbelievably happy. At the moment, he was giving it everything he had, and here was someone who could handle every bit of it. A colossal amount of pressure was pounding on his back from the gigantic hunk of ice, but he couldn't help but consider it another fun factor of the fight.

The four blades that had been converted into blocks of ice in a split second had lost their momentum and were tumbling to the ground. The Vortex Edge they were supposed to be cloaked in was showing no sign of breaking through the ice, which likely meant that the magic had already been dispelled.

“Ah, a foothold.”

Up until then, Kelvin had managed to maintain the perfect distance to allow him to one-sidedly assault Sylvia with the longer reach of his weapon, but now she had regained her footing. He couldn't let her use it to escape, which made combat in their current positions that much more complicated.

Kelvin immediately unleashed a Hyper Impact in hopes of scrambling the ice all around so that it could no longer be used for footholds, understanding that the spell would have no direct effect on Sylvia herself. To his astonishment, however, she managed to regain her balance by kicking off the frozen shuriken during the briefest of moments when it passed by her. Blood had already stopped dripping from her greaves, indicating that the wounds she had suffered to her

feet were already healing.

Showing no sign of pain, her face devoid of expression, and entirely unfazed by the Hyper Impact attacks flying all around her, the girl closed in on Kelvin in an instant. Instead of choosing to land, she had opted to take the offensive.

“You’re coming to me!”

“I did promise to kill you. There’s no telling what you’d do if I gave you any space.”

A normal person in this situation would have simply waited for the meteor to fall. But Sylvia chose not to. Kelvin couldn’t tell if it had been on a whim or was a decision based on the change in circumstances. The only thing that was certain was that there was no hesitation in her movements.

She ducked his great scythe by knocking it upwards with her sabre, then threw herself against Helix Barrier. She suffered quite a bit of damage doing so, but the barrier soon gave way and fell apart as it collided with her Magic Armor. As soon as she was inside, she threw all of her momentum behind her sword, piercing Kelvin’s right wrist.

Gritting his teeth at the intense pain, Kelvin let go of his staff at the same time that Sylvia pulled her sabre back. In the current situation, with his opponent so close and his dominant hand injured, the scythe would only be in the way. Similarly, it would be difficult to fire off any spells at this distance. After pushing Parallel Processing as hard as possible, the answer it gave him was...

“Hnnngg!”

“Too bad for you, I’ve still got Sera’s Combat Technique!”

...to use the Combat Technique skill that he had copied to Skill Eater, to put Sylvia into a choke hold. She had unleashed a followup attack directed at his neck, but he blocked it by sacrificing his already injured hand, then activated Sonic Acceleration to give his Agility stat an explosive boost. Now that he was faster than his opponent, he circled around behind her and, enduring the pain, snaked his hand around her neck to constrict her windpipe. Blood spurted out from his right wrist with the strain of it, and his HP continued to inch down. With the gigantic meteor also closing in from overhead, time was running out fast.

Damn, Fly was also dispelled. Is that because of Magic Armor too?

With the spell that had been keeping him afloat losing effect, the two figures that were glued together went into free fall.

“If that giant lump of ice reaches me, it’s your win. If I manage to render you unconscious before then, it’s my win. No matter how it ends, thank you for the fight, Sylvia.”

No sound came from Sylvia’s mouth as she struggled desperately to get out of the choke hold. But it was to no avail. Her mind was

growing dim, and her grip on the sabre was weakening.

At this rate, I'll be first to die...

With her very last drop of strength, she grabbed her sword with both hands. Fortunately, her broken right hand had already recovered enough to move again. She directed the trembling sword tip towards her own chest. Or to be more specific, her heart.

“Wait, you’re not —”

Even Kelvin couldn’t help but be alarmed. The smile disappeared from his face, but he had no time to react. Sylvia’s sabre pierced her own heart before skewering his as well. The two of them crashed to the ground and, a split second later, were crushed beneath a massive lump of ice.



The audience had fallen deathly silent, the air ringing with the fading echoes of the deafening crash. The stage where the two adventurers had fought on was gone without a trace, replaced by an enormous crater that was currently occupied by a massive chunk of ice. The most conspicuous absences, however, were those of the two contestants. They were not up in the air nor were they standing on the ground.

“Ummmmm...Goldiana-san, can you explain what just happened?”

“This seems like an emergency, so I’ll keep it brief. While falling, Sylvia-chan pierced her own heart along with Kelvin’s as they fell. Then the meteor went boom on top of them!”

“Uh, I would think a sword through the heart would be enough to activate the Oracle’s spell, right? Or does it, uh, activate twice?”

“It’s a one-time use fail-safe! IT’S AN EMERGENCY! SAVE THEM BOTH!”

Goldiana’s scream jolted everyone back into action. High-ranked adventurers and skilled warriors from various affiliations leaped down into the combat zone. Their immediate response was commendable, but they quickly realized they had no idea what to do about the icy mountain. The closer they got, the more bewildered they became at the sheer size of what Sylvia had generated.

“What the...*damn* this is big!”

“How’re we supposed to break this? With a hammer?”

“Don’t touch it carelessly! You might hurt yourself!”

“We need to melt it with Red Magic! Someone call —”

As everyone milled about in consternation, a figure ran over, raising a huge cloud of dust behind them.

“Get out of my waaaaay!”

Goldiana had jumped right out of his commentator’s seat and converted his normally red fighting aura into a shade of pink. The

crowd parted without question before him, some capitulating to his sheer intensity, some because they instinctively felt the danger of not doing so.

“Everyone, get out of the barrier! I’ll move thi— wait.”

The moment he made to focus his aura around his right fist, the giant lump of ice seemed to shift.

“This is...EVERYONE, GET BACK! IT’S CRUMBLING!”

Even as he shouted, several lines ran along the surface of the comet. Each fissure was being created by a slicing attack with a weapon. The slashes that flew out climbed into the sky, destroying Colette’s barrier and flying off into the distance. A few moments later, the entire lump of ice began to collapse. Now that the barrier was gone, there was nothing preventing the smaller pieces from spilling out beyond the arena. And all the while, dangerous slashes continued to fly out, steadily whittling down the remaining frost.

“RUN AS FAST AS YOU CAN!”

“Mages, set up a new barrier NOW! Protect the spectators! HURRY!”

The crumbling of the giant meteor threw the venue into an even bigger state of disarray. Thankfully, there was still quite a bit of space between where the stage used to be and the first tier of seats, so no one had been hurt yet. But it was always better to be safe than sorry, so everyone leaped into action to contribute in any way they could.

“Pyrohydra Octonary!”

A single red arrow suddenly shot out from the stands. In the blink of an eye, it burst into flames, then transformed into a fiery dragon with eight heads. The heads separated to form eight new dragons that started circling around the ice, their orbits overlapping with each others’.

As the ice was continuously shaved away from the inside by the mysterious flying slashes, it was being rapidly melted down from the outside. The flames gradually tightened their noose, sending up huge plumes of steam. Before long, nothing of the ice was left. The crisis had been averted without a single casualty.

Efil, who had shot the arrow, asked through the Network, ::Was that enough, Master?: The end of the sentence was delivered with quite a bit more force than was customary for her, hinting at her anger.

Just what I needed, thanks. And come on, don’t be so angry, Efil.

Now that the ice was gone, the crater was bare for all to see, revealing a squarish hole in the ground at its center. All eyes were fixed on that hole as a figure emerged.

“Here I am, alive and well after all.”

Kelvin came into view with Sylvia under one of his arms. The

venue erupted into thunderous applause.



“Phew, I’m glad I made it in time...”

In fact, I had thought I was done for. After Sylvia had skewered our hearts, I did actually die for a moment. However, Colette’s spell had immediately activated, going so far as to restore me to a state without a sword in my chest. Rather than “recovery,” it would be more accurate to call what happened “a turning back of time.”

Slightly bewildered by the experience, Sylvia and I exchanged blank looks, question marks practically hovering over our heads. I was still hugging her, but everything had happened so fast that I didn’t think the audience had even seen it. If we had been frozen in that state and Mr. Brutal Beast had been present, he would probably have gone insane with rage. Neither of us had much choice in how things played out, but it was lucky for everyone that the mad dog Nagua had been bedridden for the day.

Although we had both awoken in a state of confusion, the situation offered no respite. Namely, Sylvia’s Glacial Meteor was still falling, and it was almost on top of our heads. Now that Colette’s spell had been activated once, there was no point in continuing the match, so I wrapped an arm around Sylvia, conjured a breeze to bring me my Black Staff of Disaster, which had been falling beside us, and used Green Magic to dig what was effectively a bomb shelter as fast as I could, taking care not to accidentally touch the remaining traces of Wintry Expanse.

To be extra sure, I even strengthened the walls with Adamantite Rampart as I went. Only after the meteor’s impact and my confirmation that things had settled down did I begin the work of excavating from below using Boreas Death Scythe. I had no idea how big the thing actually was, so I adjusted the power of the slashes and angled them to fly straight up into the sky. In order to ensure there were no casualties above ground, I had sent Efil and the others telepathic messages asking them to help on their side.

That was how we had stayed alive. My handling of the situation had been a bit off-the-cuff, but the end result was satisfactory, all things considered. I didn’t even have to activate my trump card — the blessing from Melfina — in front of the crowd.

“I...didn’t manage to kill you. So frustrating...”

“Uh, no, you *did* kill me!” *There was literally a sword in my heart! Wait, was she...* “Did you approach me in the middle of the fall because you were planning on killing me *twice*?”

“Mhm. I did promise to do my best. In this case, that meant having to do it twice. That’s what I came up with when I thought

about how to do it during the match.”

How is she saying that with such a straight face? I know I'm not in a position to comment on other people, but this girl is pretty out there. Although in the context of our fight, the misconception is definitely in line with the general direction of what I wanted.

Amid the unending praise and ovation, two voices rose up from the commentators' seats.

“Isn't it such a relief that everything worked out in the end, Colette-sama?”

“Um, why was I made to sit in here? I'm not feeling all that good right now, actually...”

For some reason, Pretti's seat was now occupied by Colette.

“Because of the absolutely unprecedented outcome of today's match, of course! Activation of your magic is our usual criterion for deciding the winner, but today we saw its simultaneous activation on both contestants! Therefore, we have no idea how to call the outcome!”

“So, you're asking me to make the call?”

“That's right!”

I couldn't see them from down in the crater, but I could almost imagine Colette sighing.

“To be exact, the activation was not entirely simultaneous. The time difference is almost imperceptible, but chronologically speaking, Sylvia-san's sword pierced her own heart before it pierced Kelvin-san's. As such, it was her spell that technically activated first.”

“So you're saying...”

“That's right. Accordingly, the winner of this match is...Kelvin-san! Congratulations!”

“WHOAAAAA!!”

Although the Oracle had seemed a bit of a mess before the match, she was clearly used to speaking to large crowds of people. The skillful way in which she delivered the pronouncement caused the audience to explode into an even higher state of frenzied cheers

“So, the winner is Kelvin-san! Now *this* is a match that is sure to go down in history! Even though I understood pretty much none of it!”

“It was indeed a match that was worth seeing. As a representative of Deramis, I'd also love to inv— ugh!”

“Colette-sama? Why are you suddenly covering your mou— th-the mic! Mute the mic!!”

I watched my companions rushing towards me with the music of truly tragic sounds in the background.

I don't think I'll ever forget this day, either.



Located just to the south of the square in the heart of Parth was a clock tower that had been there since the city's founding by its four neighboring countries. A symbol of the order attained by the signing of the peace accord, the structure towered over everything else in the city and was a famous tourist location. Near its very top was a viewing platform from which the whole city could be seen. The place was usually opened to the public and, naturally, was quite popular with visitors.

Now, however, the top of the clock tower seemed empty and abandoned. After all, the people of Parth had been wrapped up in their festivities since early that morning, and there was a match between two Rank S adventurers going on at that very moment. The tourists who would normally be coming and going were nowhere to be seen, every last one of them having been drawn away by what was happening in the central square.

But the viewing platform was not entirely vacant. There was a lone figure there, looking down at the coliseum from where he stood.

"So, she really is..."

The gaze of the man in armor was directed at Kelvin's opponent for the match, Sylvia. He nodded several times as if he had just confirmed something.

"The great general of the Steel Knight Order is spectating all the way out here, without a single bodyguard in sight?"

"That voice...is that you, Kokudori?"

The man turned around calmly, not upset in the least about having been identified. The one who had called out to him was the dwarven member of Sylvia's party. And as Kokudori had discerned, the man who had been watching the match was indeed Dan D'Alba, General of the Steel Knight Order of Trycen.

"What an honor it is for such an esteemed personage to remember the name of one such as me. I don't believe we're personally acquainted, though."

"I make it a point to remember the faces and names of powerful fighters."

"That's an interesting remark for someone from a country that hates other races with such a passion."

"The country's stance might be as you say, but no one truly subscribes to that idea. And every once in a while, you get people like me. Most of all, if you intend to take that logic of yours to the extreme, then everything you say to me, you'd have to say to *her* down there, wouldn't you?" Dan said, pointing towards the coliseum. At that very moment, an enormous lump of ice had appeared in the

air. “Well, I’ll be. Lunoir’s already gained a Rank S spell of her own? She sure has grown over the past two years. Ah, no, I’m sorry. She goes by Sylvia now, doesn’t she? And is that Ashley I see in the stands?”

“You’ve worked it out, then.”

“She’s grown out her hair and took off that muffler she was always wearing. But as I said, I make it a point to remember the faces of powerful fighters.”

“What are you planning to do with her?”

The air surrounding Kokudori changed, warping into a pressure that bore down on Dan. The old general, however, looked unfazed. He lifted his shoulders in a shrug to indicate that he wasn’t there to fight.

“Come on, don’t be so on edge. I’m not here to force her to come home, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“What, then?” The atmosphere softened, just a little.

“This is a letter from Shutola-sama. Please pass it on to Lunoir.”

“A...letter?”

Dan passed an envelope to Kokudori that bore the wax seal of the royal family of Trycen.

“When Lunoir and Ashley disappeared two years ago, Shutola-sama was terribly saddened. With her station being what it was, Lunoir was the only person Shutola-sama could speak to frankly and openly. Shutola-sama mobilized the Black Ops, but they couldn’t find anything and she eventually had no choice but to call them back.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“I have no idea why she’s making an appearance as an adventurer now, and I do not plan on doing anything about it, not after all this time. The only people who’ve figured out her new identity are Shutola-sama, myself, and a few others I know I can trust. I don’t wish to do anything that would make Shutola-sama more upset.”

“What are you sa—”

“Read that letter; I’m sure it’ll answer a lot of your questions. Well, it’s about time for me to be getting back. My age seems to be doing quite a number on me these days. Can you even comprehend how tough it was coming all the way here on horseback? Nobody wants to get old, eh?” Dan grimaced, pounding his waist a few times.

“You...aren’t going to ask why Sylvia left?” Kokudori asked suddenly as the other man reached the stairs. Although the dwarf was no longer emanating an aura of hostility, he still had his guard up.

“If I ask her to, will she come back? Probably not, right? Doing so would only reignite my feelings of regret. She disappeared without a word to even Shutola-sama, her closest friend. I imagine her reasons were weighty enough to reflect that choice, and that the decision was not made lightly. As such, I am willing to accept things as they are.

Shutola-sama has also forgiven her. Her successor's been nothing but trou— oh, wait, no, he's no longer with us, either..."

Without saying more, Dan turned and disappeared down the stairs, raising one hand in a casual farewell, but not bothering to turn back again.

Chapter 3: Present

After winning the practice match, my party and I were swarmed by those wanting interviews, handshakes, and all manners of things. Sylvia, who was effectively also debuting that day, seemed to fare no better judging from the crowd surrounding her as well.

By the time I finished dealing with the large number of people vying for my attention, the sun had already set. The festivities were going to continue until late into the night, so the streets were still filled with revelry and merrymaking.

“Good show out there. Here’s your new guild card. We’ll be continuing to count on you in the future.”

“That’s...all you’ve got for me?”

I was now in Rio’s office to pay him a visit and grab my new Rank S card. Considering the day’s events, however, his reception seemed a bit cold.

I did work pretty hard today, I thought as I accepted the package that the card was wrapped in.

“Ahaha, I’m quite tired now. All I can think about is getting home and crawling into bed. Getting old...is not something I’d recommended.”

“I see...”

“But, well, I can’t actually do that, now can I?”

He smiled wryly as he wiped his monocle. For once, he actually did look exhausted. On my way up to his office, I’d spied some of the guild staff who had crashed right at their desks. As the man overseeing everything, Rio was probably more spent than all of them. I myself had dinner scheduled with the Oracle of Deramis, so I couldn’t go home and sleep either.

“Kel-nii, let me see! Let me see your new card!”

“I want to see it too, Master.”

“My king, hurry, hurry!”

Unable to wait any longer, Rion and Efil urged me to open the package. For some reason, Gerard was also acting like a child. *All right, all right, I’m taking it out now.*

“Feast your eyes on this beauty!”

“OOHHHH!”

“OOHHHH!”

“OOHHHH!”

After slowly and deliberately undoing the wrapping, I took the card out and held it aloft. While it had been gold-colored at Rank A, it now shone in a fantastical rainbow coloring. The halo surrounding the card was probably just my imagination, but even so, the reaction from Rion and the others was extremely satisfying.

Even Sera looked somewhat impressed. "So, its color changes according to the angle of the light."

"It's holographic!" Rion exclaimed.

"Ahem." Rio cleared his throat. "The card is actually quite precious, so don't go flashing it about, all right? Oh, look at the time. Do you remember what you have planned after this?"

"Yep, dinner with Colette-sama. Um, is she...okay?"

I, for one, was more than ready to forget the nightmare of the afternoon for her dignity's sake, but I couldn't speak for the thousands of others who had heard the same thing broadcast loud and clear all over town. There had been no sign of her anywhere since the incident, which did seem a little worrying.

"Probably not. The entire Deramisian delegation has locked themselves up in their quarters and have been praying this whole time, I hear."

So he says, Melfina.

::I knew you'd ask me. Don't worry; the girl is fine. She's gotten through far more trying tribulations than this. Quite a few times, I might add.::

I imagine it would still be a pretty big blow for a teenage girl. I'm a guy and I know I would plunge into depression if it happened to me.

"I'll deal with her," added Rio, "so you just follow Ange-kun's guidance. I believe Goldiana and Sylvia are also on their way."

"All right, I'll do that. Come on, guys, time to go."

We headed downstairs to the counter where Ange was waiting for us. When I closed the office door, I thought I heard Rio muttering to himself, "Vomiting...in public...what am I even supposed to say to her..."



I changed back into my formal wear, then followed Ange to the most high-class restaurant in Parth. I'd seen it from the outside a few times before but had never been able to bring myself to go in because of how stiff and formal it looked. Most importantly, I didn't know anything about dining etiquette here. The raucous atmosphere of the taverns was more my cup of tea.

But this is a good opportunity. Let's see what kind of dishes such a fancy place serves. Wait, no, that's not my main goal today. The point of this dinner is to deepen my relationship with Deramis and use that to

gather information about the Rizean Empire.

"This is the venue for the dinner. It looks like Goldiana-san and Sylvia-san's group have already arrived, so you guys can go straight in and take your seats."

"Got it, thanks. What are you going to do now, Ange?"

"Sadly, I still have some work left, so I've got to get back to the guild. But the festivities are ending tonight so it's the last push!"

"You're having a tough time of it too, I see. Once everything calms down, let's go grab a meal or something."

"Really?! Guess I'll look forward to that, then. Um, can we do it, like, just the two —"

"Kelvin-chan, there you are! What are you dearies doing standing around outside? Come on in, come on in! I've been waiting forever!"

During my conversation with Ange, Prettia had appeared in the doorway. The incredibly buff man was still clad in the same dress from the afternoon. *Yeah, I think I need a bit more time to get used to the sight...*

"Sorry, we're coming. We'll be going now, Ange."

"Ah, mm, okay. Good luck in there, Kelvin."

For some reason, Ange's face was expressionless as we parted. *I guess she's probably tired, just like Rio is. Let's find a day to pay her a visit and bring her some food or something.*



The atmosphere inside the restaurant was, to my surprise, quite subdued, having none of the gaudy flashiness that I associated with the nobility. Instead, the interior design was refined and classy, and the same could be said of the outfits of the customers. Everyone's manner of eating had a certain gracefulness and elegance to it all.

"Uh, if that level of etiquette is a requirement here, I'm in deep trouble," I muttered with some alarm.

"I...don't think I can do it either," Rion agreed with an equally pale face.

Sera turned to us, looking genuinely surprised. "You two don't know dining etiquette?"

The two of us were a little shocked by her reaction. I forgot it every once in a while, but Sera was demon royalty. In other words, she was a princess. As such, she had a perfect grasp of things like table manners and overall etiquette. She simply chose not to use them on a regular basis because she was too lazy.

The rest of our group was, come to think of it, quite high-specced in that regard as well. Take Gerard, for instance. Despite having been born a commoner, he had worked his way up to become a knight — which was a rank of nobility — and thus knew this type of etiquette

inside and out. In his case, him wearing full armor was probably more problematic.

As for Efil, what was there to say? This was a girl who spent every single day improving herself as a maid. There was no way she would shirk on something like formal etiquette. She learned everything she could at every opportunity she had, even going as far as to ask the maids at Toraj Castle for instructions and training while we were staying in the city. In short, there was no cause for concern there.

“K-Kel-nii, which side is the knife and which is the fork?”

Calm down, sister mine. Your dominant hand is your knife hand. Wait...it is, right? It's this one, isn't it? Shit, now I'm doubting myself. In the first place, are the manners in this world even the same as those back in Japan? From what the other customers are doing, it doesn't look all that different, but...ugh, how can the party leader and his sister be the ones who are the least presentable?! If it's just about being polite, I might be able to manage somehow, but etiquette is knowledge-based; I can't know what I never learned.

“Oh, don't fret, dear. We're in the room at the back, so there's no need to worry about manners. Besides, what's truly important is not the etiquette itself but a considerate attitude towards others. Meals are meant to be enjoyed, after all!”

“If you say so...” I replied, not entirely reassured. I turned to my companions. “Still, we are meeting the Oracle, who represents all of Deramis, so let's at least put in the minimum amount of effort to be polite, please.”

Prettia clapped a hand over his mouth. “Oh, my, what a gentleman you are, Kelvin-chan!”

“Is this really going to work out?” Gerard muttered.

It's hardly perfect, but we can't afford to be preoccupied right now. We have to learn whatever we can regarding Rizea from Colette.

::Kel-nii, if push comes to shove...::

I see you're thinking what I'm thinking.

As a fail-safe, Rion and I secretly resolved to have Efil give us instructions through the Network during the meal.



The moment I laid eyes on our dining party and registered the mismatch between their splendid outfits and the way they were eating, all my worries flew right out the window.

“Oh 'ey, iz 'elvin-zan.”

“Sylvia, don't speak while you're chewing!”

There was Sylvia, shoveling food into her mouth even though her cheeks were already puffed up like a squirrel's, and Ema, admonishing her. The two of them seemed to be around the same age based on

their appearances, but their exchanges were reminiscent of a parent and child from time to time.

“Fuck, they were invited too?”

“Of course they were. They’re the main guests tonight.”

Oh, hey, the great and mighty Brutal Beast has recovered enough to be up and about. That elf, Ariel, must be a pretty good healer. The beast’s just sitting there next to Kokudori, energetically wolfing down his food in spite of the bandages he’s still sporting. Grabbing a bone in one hand and biting directly into the meat is such an adventurer-like way of eating. I didn’t think I would feel relief at seeing this guy again, but his table manners do put me at ease.

“I’m so sorry for the repeated disrespect our stupid dog is causing you!”

Upon seeing us, Ariel’s head whipped around to look at Nagua, then she shot up in her seat and gave us a beautiful ninety-degree bow in apology.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I feel like a burden’s just been lifted from my shoulders,” I replied with a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

“I never thought I’d feel as reassured as I do now,” Rion added, similarly grinning.

“What?” Ariel looked confused, caught off guard by our reactions.

“Uh...th-thank you for being so...understanding...”

Thinking about it calmly now, I suppose it is an absurd idea to expect good etiquette from most adventurers.

“Now you see what I mean, dearie?”

“You were right; looks like I was worrying about nothing after all,” I admitted. From the corner of my eye, I saw Sera shutting up Nagua with a death glare on the whole party’s behalf. Another question abruptly popped into my mind. “Um, are we supposed to be eating even though the Oracle hasn’t arrived yet?”

Sylvia, who had finally finished swallowing everything in her mouth, replied, “A Deramisian messenger just came. He told us to go ahead and start eating because the Oracle will be late.”

“I see...well, I suppose she has her own circumstances...” *Let’s not recall the atmosphere in the arena from that moment anymore.*

I directed my thoughts to the Network. *Melfina, is Colette actually coming? Can you tell?*

::Relax, honey. She just arrived::

I turned around at Melfina’s words and heard the sound of several pairs of footsteps on the other side of the door, which opened a moment later with a soft *click*.

“I am truly sorry for my lateness, everyone. I am Colette Deramilus, and I thank you all for being here tonight.”

Before my eyes stood the Oracle, her face adorned with a smile so

clear and beautiful that it seemed as if the afternoon incident had never occurred.

Oh, hey, looks like she's back on her feet. Just what kind of trick did that sly old geezer use? It does bother me a little how the smiles on the faces of Colette's guards are so stiff, though.

::Oh, no, I'm sure she recovered entirely on her own. She's well accustomed to being disgraced to that degree.::

Seriously? I wouldn't have guessed it from that pretty face of hers. What kind of disgrace is she regularly suffering to be "accustomed" to it, anyway?

"Oh, my, we've been waiting for you, Colette-chan! All right, now that everyone's assembled, let's raise a toast!"



Roughly an hour after the first toast, the alcohol had fully made its way into our systems (with the exception of Rion, who was underage, and Sera, for obvious reasons). After eating at the tables for a while, we had largely shifted to a standing buffet approach, with everyone milling around while they ate and drank. The food itself was delicious, but I couldn't help finding it a little unsatisfactory. *Maybe I've been spoiled by Efil's cooking. I'm honestly at a loss for how to react to the meal here.*

"Let go of me!" Nagua howled. "That bastard's definitely planning on doing something to Sylvia!"

Kokudori sighed. "No, he's not. The three of them are in the middle of an important talk between representatives. Don't bother them."

"The man is right. So, how about we drink together over there?" Gerard chuckled, clapping the beastkin on the back and steering him a distance away.

"Fuck, why is it just guys around me?!"

"Oh, you wanted to join Sera and Goldiana's table? You should have said so earlier. Kokudori-dono, would you mind giving me a hand?"

"It would be my pleasure."

"N-Nooooo! Those two aren't girls!"

Sounds like things are really livening up on their side of the room. Why can't I be part of that circle?

"Kelvin-san, are you listening to me?"

"Of course I am. You were talking about Touya, right?"

At the moment, I was being forced to listen to Colette's complaints. I had originally approached her in hopes of questioning her about Rizea but had quickly lost the initiative in the conversation. And although Sylvia was sitting with us, she had been entirely focused

on eating the whole time. Since I had become acquainted with Touya during my time in Toraj, I was now Colette's sole target for venting.

"That's right! I'm sure you understand, having worked with Touya yourself! Everywhere he goes, he gets into trouble, and more often than not, it's related to a woman! Just how many times do you think he's seen me in my underwear..."

"Hahaha, that sounds tough. When I was with him, nothing of the sort occurred, though."

"Is that true? I can hardly believe it."

Oh, wow, she looks genuinely surprised. Well, I did keep my guard up the whole time, to prevent anything from happening to Efil and the others, so maybe that did the trick? Doing so really wore me out, though.

"Um, there's been something that's been bothering me for a while now. Please excuse me."

"Uh...what are you doing?"

Colette had suddenly leaned in and started sniffing me. *Wait, do I smell sweaty?! But I took a bath after the match!*

The girl seemed to have zoned out for a moment, then suddenly started. "N-No, it was nothing! Please don't mind me!"

"I...see..." *What the hell was that?*

After smelling me, Colette's eyes seemed to glaze over, her breathing turning ragged as her cheeks flushed, and she shot me glances again and again. It was so obvious that even Sylvia tilted her head, going, "Hm?"

::Uh-oh....:

What's wrong, Melfina? You know what's going on?

::Honey, please be careful. Colette possesses the Olfaction skill at Rank S. There is a possibility that she's detected my smell on you. This could be a huge crisis::

Uh...what?

I had failed to notice that Colette's eyes had gradually taken on the glint of a religious fanatic.



"Is this about the present, Sera-chan? Did you not give it to him yet?"

"Yeah...not yet..."

At one corner of the outdoor terrace, under the light of the moon, Sera was consulting Goldiana.

"I'm sorry it's taking me so long. You even made time to go out and look for it with me and everything..."

"Oh, pshh, hon, don't worry about that."

The demon girl was clearly in low spirits. The topic of their discussion was the present that Sera had failed to give to Kelvin the

night before. She was having trouble finding the right time to bring it up again.

“Sera-chan, be honest with me. How do you actually feel about Kelvin-chan?”

“I...like him. I think.”

“As a fellow party member and as a friend? Or as a man?”

Sera fell silent. She had originally prepared the item as a thank-you gift to Kelvin for looking after her while she had Evolved, but the meaning of the gift seemed to be gradually shifting, and she was becoming aware of it.

“I’m not sure. It’s my first time experiencing feelings like these...”

“That’s the same as giving me an answer. Have more confidence in yourself, dearie!”

“But...”

“No ifs, ands, or buts! At this rate, who knows, maybe even Sylvia-chan will fall for him! My female intuition tells me that Kelvin-chan definitely has woman troubles! Efil-chan seems like she’ll go along with whatever he says, so you’ve got to hold the reins properly!”

Goldiana’s intuition was actually half-correct, but there was no one present at the moment to tell him so.

“All right, honey, I’ll teach you this strategy; it’s bound to work,” Goldiana continued reassuringly before whispering something into Sera’s ear.

“Um...so I just have to say that line?”

“That’s right! Call Kelvin-chan to your room tonight. Give him the present, and when the mood is right, say it. Don’t worry, it’s worked for me many times! Oh, and when you say it, your pose should be —”

Goldiana’s instructions continued for quite a while longer.



“Your face looks flushed, Oracle. Should we take our leave soon?”

“No, I’m absolutely fine. Stand down.”

“As you say...”

The head of the Deramisian guards had come over with a look of concern but was immediately dismissed. Colette was interacting with me and Sylvia in a friendly enough manner, but there was a natural authority to her exchange with her guard. *That aura of dignity despite having a few cups in her...I guess she’s not the Oracle of Deramis for nothing.*

But the guard was right that Colette looked a bit strange. In contrast to her pale face this afternoon, her cheeks were now as red as a tomato. Melfina had warned me to be careful, but I couldn’t pretend that I didn’t notice her condition. Sylvia had returned to eating,

leaving me to deal with the oracle alone.

“Umm...Kelvin-san, I think I might be a bit tipsy. Would you mind accompanying me outside for some fresh air?”

“Not at all. I suppose you did have quite a few glasses — taking a small break sounds like a good idea. Will you be joining us, Sylvia?”

“It’s about time for me to get back to Ema. This was fun. Please invite me again.”

But you were just eating the whole time and didn’t say anything! Well, as long as she enjoyed herself, who am I to comment, right? At the very least, we have now become, as the Japanese saying goes, friends who are close enough to have eaten out of the same pot.

Colette and I headed out to the terrace, leaving Sylvia behind.

::Honey, I’m saying this for your own good: you really should turn back while you still can::

Even if she’s detected your presence by smell, that’s not enough to serve as evidence. And look how out of it she seems; I’m just helping her get some air.

::That’s not what I’m worried about. I’ve said it before, but Colette is a bit sick::

If she’s sick, that’s all the more reason to help her out.

::All right, okay. Don’t blame me for whatever happens next::

On my way to the terrace, I noticed Gerard and the other two guys observing us. *When did the three of them get so close? They even have their arms around each other’s shoulders.*

“Oho, that’s surprising — my king’s chosen Colette-dono, it seems. I can only hope this doesn’t turn into a diplomatic incident.”

“And here I had expected him to be after Sylvia instead...”

“I told you guys! I *told* you Sylvia wouldn’t do anything obscene like that! Wait a sec, so you *were* expecting him to make a move?! The fuck happened to the ‘important talk’ shit?!”

It sounds like they’re getting heated up about something over there. What could they possibly be talking about?



Colette and I found ourselves greeted by a sky full of stars as we stepped out onto the terrace connected to our private room. The place was a lot bigger than I’d expected and furnished with several tables and seats. I saw Sera and Prettia huddled at the far end, but they seemed to be having a serious conversation. I steered Colette in the other direction so as to not bother them.

“Colette-san, how about we take a seat over there?”

“Yes, please.”

I pulled the chair back for her. It was a comfortable night, with just the right amount of wind blowing. *If she stays here for a while, she*

should start to feel a bit be— wait, is it just me, or do her eyes look kind of different from before?

“Are you sure you’re okay, Colette-san?”

“There’s no need for the ‘-san.’ ‘Colette’ is fine.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Please just call me ‘Colette.’”

“Suuuure, okay. So, Colette?”

The instant I said her name, she grabbed me with both arms and shivered a little. She looked up at me, her eyes dyed with an emotion I couldn’t quite make out. *Seriously, is she okay here?!*

“Thank you very much. I know this is an audacious request, but...please allow me to call you Kelvin-sama in turn!”

“What?! Hold on, Colette, what are you —”

After announcing what sounded almost like a confession of love, Colette threw herself at me. Not only that; she pressed her face against my chest and started taking deep breaths. Even with Parallel Processing working at full capacity, my mind couldn’t absorb what was happening.

“I knew it — this aromatic, noble, and heavenly fragrance is definitely Melfina-sama’s! Ohhhhh, if I close my eyes, I can just see that divine figure of hers, illuminated by a snow-white light of holiness! Oh, how dazzling! Oh, the magnificence and splendor!”

Forget full capacity — my brain had completely shorted out.

“Ten years it had been since I accepted my divine calling to serve as Melfina-sama’s Oracle! I trained my sense of smell in hopes of at least savoring her fragrance, so there is no possibility I would be mistaken in such close proximity! Judging from the amount of lingering aroma, I’d say you have been in direct contact with Melfina-sama in the past few days! The only conclusion I can draw is...Kelvin-sama, are you an emissary of the heavens?! Are you an emissary of the Goddess?!”

What’s with that totally accurate guess?! And her face is far too close. Her eyes are scaring me too!

::I did say so, didn’t I? That she is ‘sick.’::

You purposely phrased it in an ambiguous way, didn’t you?! She’s the textbook definition of a religious fanatic!

::Oh, fine, I guess I’ll help you out a bit. When I’m this close, I can grant a prophecy even in my current form::

Oh god...dess, thank you.

“Colette, can you hear me?” Melfina asked, broadcasting her voice directly into our brains.

“That...is Melfina-sama!”

“Keep your voice down. Unlike the Great Cathedral, this place is not soundproofed.”

“I-I am terribly sorry! I got too excited...” Colette panted in a way that somehow made even her apology seem uncomfortably sensual.

Danger Detection, couldn't you have warned me earlier? I should probably rank you up soon.

“I’m telling you this only because it’s you, Colette, but Kelvin is moving on business separate from that of the Heroes. When you return to Deramis, pretend not to know about his connection with me. So as to prevent other people from finding out, I strictly forbid you to interfere in his matters. However, under the above conditions, if you are able to aid him within your personal capacity, I give you permission to do so.”

Nice job surreptitiously including a pretext for making her give me information, Melfina!

“Yes, my Goddess! I will do everything you say! Um...but may I be so presumptuous as to ask exactly what your relationship with Kelvin-sama is?”

“He’s...my husband!”

Fuck! You made me choke on my saliva! And what's with that singsong voice?! You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?!

“Why do you seem so surprised, honey? Especially after how intense we were in bed last night...”

The only thing intense was your sleeping posture! Can you not toss and turn so much?!

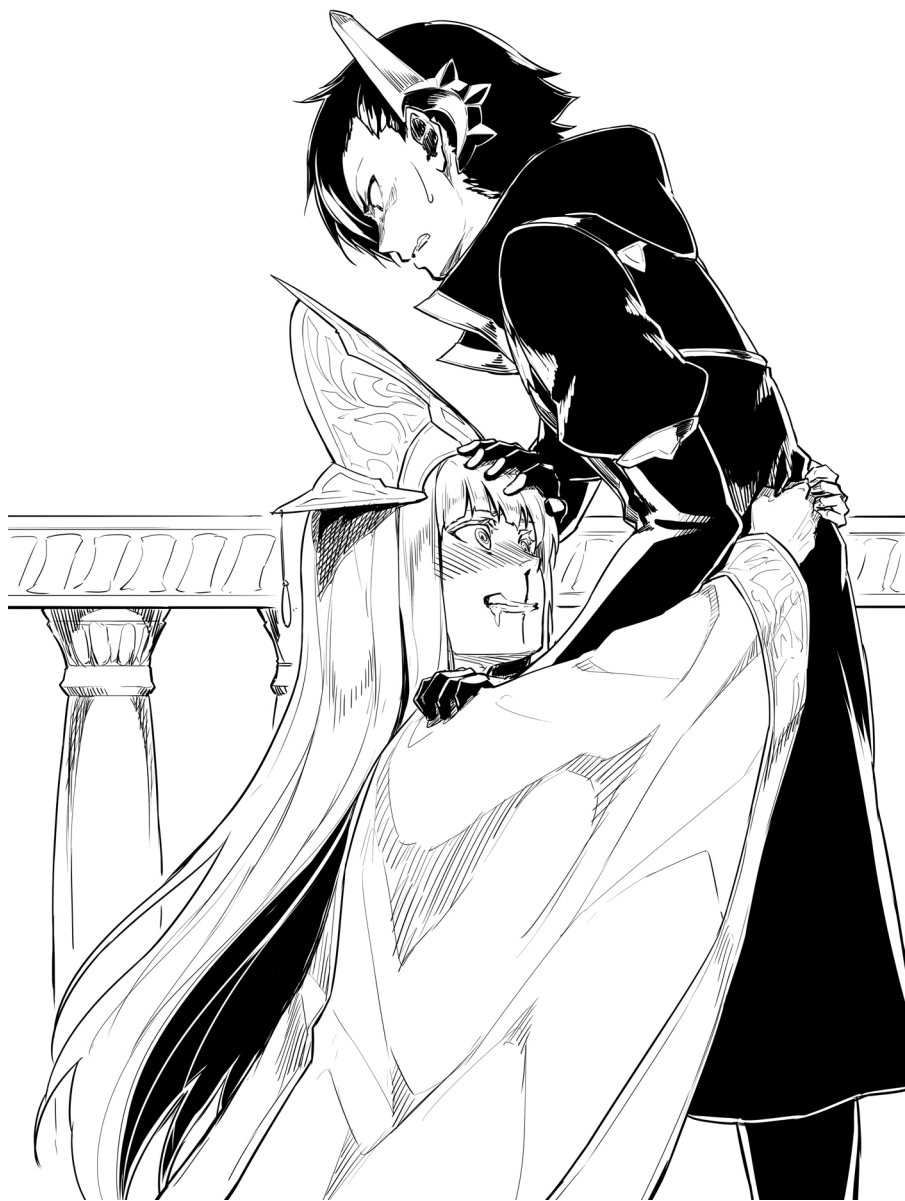
“H-How can this be?! I...Kelvin-sama, I have been so disrespectful to you!” Colette lamented as she slid off me, crumpling to the floor.

There's no need to apologize, because I'm not Melfina's husband!

“Colette, that’s not it. Mel is actually —”

“You are so close to Melfina-sama that you refer to her by a pet name?! There is no longer any room for doubt. Kelvin-sama, please grind me under your foot for my irreverence! Exact upon me any punishment you deem fit! Do with my body as you wish! Please punish me! I beg of you — please!”

“Hold on, you — do you have a nosebleed?!” I suddenly found myself saddled with the task of calming the oracle down. Thankfully, Sera seemed fully occupied by something else and failed to notice what was happening on my side of the terrace. I could hear her still talking with Goldiana some distance away.





“L-Like this?”

“That’s perfect, Sera-chan! You’re so cute, even I might fall for you!”

While Kelvin and Colette were making their way from the private dining room to the terrace, the trio of men also moved to the window, careful not to draw attention to themselves. They watched as Kelvin and the oracle sat down on the opposite end of the balcony from Sera and Goldiana.

“Oho, looks like they’ve got a good atmosphere going. Two youngsters opening their hearts to each other under the starry sky. My king sure moves quickly.”

“The eyes of the Oracle...those are indeed the eyes of a maiden in love.”

“Hah! I knew it, that bastard’s just a fucking playboy!”

Each man had something different to say, but all of them were doing the same thing. Namely, they were staring.

“Ohhh! The Oracle has embraced my king! She’s much more proactive than she seems!”

“She’s even rubbing her face on his chest. That decides it. She’s completely fallen for him.”

“Hah! *That’s* the second-highest authority in Deramis? What an easy woman.”

“If only you were as proactive as she is, Nagua. You always come up with the most roundabout way of doing things; it’s just...”

“What?! Don’t make this about me!”

The three of them were still staring as they bantered.

“Oh, heavens! Are they sure about doing something like that right here?! Colette-dono is grabbing my king’s lower body!”

“Being young sure is great. Sometimes they do the most unexpected things.”

“You two realize how fucking huge your bodies are?! Stop leaning forward — I can’t see!”

They were staring *very* hard. And at the same time, another group was watching them.

“What are Nagua and the guys doing?”

“Don’t worry about it, Sylvia. Just pretend you don’t see them. Efil-san, would you happen to know how to make this dish as well?”

“Mm, my favorite.”

“Yes, I do. Would you like me to teach you tomorrow, Ema-sama?”

“Um, if you’re teaching her, would you mind teaching me too?”

“Good luck trying to get the person you’re interested in to notice you, Ariel!”

“R-Rion-san, shhhhhh!”

Things were far more peaceful on the girls’ side of the room.



“I will be taking my leave now, Kelvin-sama. It pains me to do so, but I must return to Deramis first thing tomorrow morning.”

“We will miss you. Someday, we’ll come pay Deramis a visit. Let’s meet up then.”

“I will look forward to it with great eagerness.”

With dinner over, we had all gathered outside the restaurant to exchange farewells. Per Melfina’s orders, Colette was behaving normally so as to not raise any suspicions. *Looks like she’s doing a good job of it.*

“I would love to grant you permission to use the teleportation gate in our capital, but I’m afraid that’s under the Pope’s jurisdiction, not mine. However, I promise to convince him to grant you access by the time we meet next!” Colette grabbed my hands and stared at me intensely with slightly teary eyes.

“I...would appreciate that, thank you very much. But there’s no need to force things on my behalf, really.” *She...is doing a good job, right? Does she fully understand what Melfina told her? The group of guys whispering in the back is bothering me, but I’ve got no time to deal with them right now. Even if Colette’s letting the facade drop a bit here, I’ve got to keep up appearances. I can get through this.*

“Thank you for your consideration. Well, then, everyone, let us meet again someday.”

“Oh, hold on, Colette-san,” Sylvia called just as Colette was about to get into the carriage awaiting her.

“Yes, Sylvia-san?”

“There’s something personal I want to ask you.”

“What might that be?”

“Um...can we discuss it in private?”

Colette paused briefly, then said, “Very well” and signaled for her guards to remain on standby.

Sylvia shot a glance at the rest of us. *Right, “in private” means she doesn’t want us to hear it, either. Let’s leave first.*

“In that case, we’ll be taking our leave.”

“Thanks, Kelvin. See you tomorrow.” Sylvia bobbed her head and gave me a small wave.

Nagua started. “Hold on, what the fuck does she mean by ‘tomorrow’?!”

“While you were busy being a naughty peeker, we made a

promise to Efil-san,” Ariel replied. “She’s going to teach us how to cook at Kelvin-san’s house tomorrow. So I’m sure we’ll be seeing him.”

“Wh-What?! This is the first I’m hearing about it!”

“You shush, Nagua! Efil-san, we’ll be in your care tomorrow.”

We turned our backs on the lively ruckus to head home. *Phew, that was a long, long day...*

“Time to head home, dearies!”

“Uh...why are you with our group, Prettia?” *Considering how naturally he joined us, it almost didn’t register for me.*

“I’m going the same way as you dearies for part of the way! And also, I’m still juuust a little worried.”

“What do you mean? Did something happen, Sera?”

“Wh-What?! No, no, nothing’s happening! Happened! It’s nothing!”

Okay, clearly something’s going on given how exaggerated that reaction was. But I think the right thing to do here is to drop it.

“Master, as I reported during the dinner, Sylvia-sama, Ema-sama, and Ariel-sama will be visiting the house tomorrow afternoon. We will be using the kitchen and the dining room.”

“Ah, right, for your cooking class. Sounds like Sylvia and the others won’t be able to stay in Parth much longer, so give them a good time.”

“Thank you, Master! Um, if you are free, we’d love it if you could join us too.”

Apparently, Ema was going to learn cooking for Sylvia’s sake, Ariel was doing it to grab the attention of a guy she liked, and Sylvia was just going to sit in and eat everything.

::Still, my king, I feel I must apologize for having thought you a sleeper. It turns out you really can pull it off!:: Gerard whispered through the Network, giving my ribs a few jabs with his elbow.

Is he referring to how I managed to get the information on Rizea from Colette? Looks like he’s pretty concerned about it. I used the Network to reply, despite not quite understanding why he was communicating so secretly.

Well, yeah, you know, things just happened that way. I learned some pretty valuable information, though. We might need to rely on Colette’s help quite a bit in the future.

::I see, so that’s why you...but still, to do that sort of thing with the Oracle, and right there in the open! Every once in a while, you really do surprise me, my king::

Yeah? was the only reply I could think of.

I mean, it’s true that taking advantage of Colette’s religious piety isn’t the most upstanding way to go about it, but the situation would have spiraled even further out of control if we didn’t handle it properly. It took

everything I had to stop Colette as she clung to my legs and begged me to kick her or punish her or whatever. In the end, I had to resort to forcibly pushing her away, but I made sure to do it in a way that didn't hurt her.

::K-Kelvin!::

This time, it was Sera who was reaching out through telepathy. As before, she sounded nervous for some reason.

::Um, can you come to my room before going to bed tonight? I have something to give you!::

Although the conversation was taking place through the Network, I could sense how hard she was pushing herself to make the request. *By "something to give," is she referring to the present from yesterday?*

On a hunch, I looked over at Prettia, who was walking next to me. Noticing my glance, he turned towards me and returned a heavy, deliberate wink. *Yeah, okay, he's definitely involved somehow.*

Sure thing. I'll be there. Wait for me.

::It's a promise!::

This time, I turned towards Sera, and she gave me the most dazzling smile ever.



We got back home, and it was time to keep my promise to Sera. I stood in front of her door, feeling slightly nervous. I knocked lightly and called out, "Sera, it's me. May I come in?"

"S-Sure."

With her permission, I entered the room. I'd been in there before while nursing her. But all the items that had been scattered around last time had been neatly put away now. Sera herself was sitting at the edge of her bed, wearing nothing but a negligee.

"Um...sit here..."

"Okay."

Sera invited me over by patting the spot next to her, and I obliged. Neither of us could bring ourselves to say anything for a while, and silence reigned. I knew that if I asked, "So, why did you want me to come?" things would proceed. But considering how nervous she was, Prettia's suggestive actions, and the mood in the room, even I could tell what was up in spite of my usual obliviousness to this sort of thing. We were so close that we could touch each other if we just reached out. *Dammit, now I'm nervous too...*

"Um..."

"Um..."

And of course we fell victim to the "two people starting to speak at the same time" cliché.

"Sorry. You go ahead, Sera."

"O-Okay. Here is the present I couldn't give you yesterday in the

tavern. It's a gift from me."

I accepted the small box that she thrust at me with quivering hands. Sera's face was turned the other way, but judging from the steam rising from her head, she had clearly turned bright red.

"Thank you. May I open it?"

"S-Sure. Though I don't know if you'll like it or not..."

I carefully undid the beautifully-done wrapping and opened the lid to reveal a silver locket pendant. The design was simple, but the engravings on the cylindrical form were absolutely beautiful. To my surprise, Analyze Eye told me that this was a Rank A item. If it had been purchased, the price would have been enormous. But more than the price, I was impressed that she had managed to find something like this on the open market.

"You...found this and bought it for me?"

"That's half right. It was Goldiana who found it. Then I bought it with my share of the reward money from the new dungeon exploration quest."

"I see. I absolutely love it. Starting tomorrow, I'll wear it all the time."

"Really?! What a relief..."

If she'd wanted to, she could have used the money to buy herself several top-dollar instruments she'd be wanting for quite a while. Instead, she had passed them up to buy this for me. *I've got to take good care of it. Honestly, I'm thrilled with this gift.*

"The pendant has a tiny compartment, right? Did you put something inside?" I took a closer look at the lock and found it surprisingly secure.

"Mh-hm! It's filled with my blood. I used my skill to compress it and cram in as much as I could! Don't open it by accident, all right? It'd cause a mess."

"I...see." *N-No, I'm still very happy about receiving this.*

Sera was now back to her usual self, seemingly having lost her nervousness after managing to hand over the present without mishap. We shot the breeze, poked fun at each other, and shared laughs together as usual. The relationship between us was...well, totally normal.

However, I was aware that I was no longer satisfied with our usual relationship. I had, in fact, fallen in love with this bright and straightforward girl who was always thinking of me and looking out for me. I loved her as much as I did Efil, and there was no changing that now. From the way she blushed whenever our eyes met, I could tell that she reciprocated my feelings.

"Kelvin, I...I have something I want to tell you," she said, completely out of the blue. I suddenly realized that our hands had

overlapped and our fingers were intertwined.

“May I say it first?”

“What?”

If I let Sera say it first, I wouldn't be a man.

“Sera, I love you.”

With that confession, I slowly brought my face close to hers. Her surprise gradually gave way as she closed her eyes. Little by little, her luscious, sakura-colored lips —

Thud.

A dull sound broke through the charged atmosphere. *That's strange. For some reason, instead of a soft feeling on my lips, my forehead hurts. It hurts a lot.*

“What is...”

“What?!”

Between our very surprised faces was a purple barrier that had appeared out of nowhere. It looked like a cylindrical wall with Sera in the middle.

“Magic? No, wait, this is —”

“A blessing...Father's blessing?!”

At Sera's exclamation, I activated Analyze Eye. True enough, the barrier was identified as “Blessing of the Demon Lord.”

Blessing of the Demon Lord (Demon Lord Gustav)

Protects the target from indecent acts. This blessing will activate regardless of the target's will and does not consume MP. Only if the target acknowledges the other party and initiates the first move will this blessing no longer activate.

Demon Lord, sir, doting on your daughter is fine and all, but are you seriously doing this even from beyond the grave?!

“Oh my god, my father is just...every, single, freaking, time!”

Ohhh boy, Sera's pupils are turning red.

“Kelvin!”

Startled, I responded with, “Yes, ma'am!” reflexively. However Sera's next action was a bigger surprise.

“Mmm!”

The barrier crumbled away. On my lips was an incredible softness. My nose was filled with her scent. I had just been kissed by Sera.



“Now Father can’t get in our way anymore.”

“I suppose not.”

It was just a peck that had lasted for the briefest of moments. And it had been so sudden that I couldn’t bring myself to meet Sera’s eyes. She was looking down in embarrassment as well.

No, no, I’m the one who’s supposed to take the lead here; even more so when I actually have a bit of experience! What am I, a middle school student? Get your act together!

“Sera...” I placed my hand on her cheek and turned her head my way.

She looked back up at me, her eyes slightly teary.

“Kelvin...please...take me...”

I later recalled this as the moment when all reason flew out of my head.



“It’s morning...”

I slowly came to my senses, bathed in the warmth of the sunlight shining through the windows. I turned my head and found Sera’s cherubic face next to me, breathing peacefully. As she was hugging me in her sleep, I could feel her bountiful breasts pressing against me. I was naked too, which made the sensation even more powerful. *What a wonderful way to wake up.*

“Turns out my willpower might be a lot more brittle than I thought...”

However, I think part of the fault lies with the words she said. It was practically a direct provocation of my primal instincts, locking my mind and actions onto a single track. No man could possibly resist. If I had to guess, that was probably Prettia’s “advice.” Due to straddling the genders, he likely has unparalleled insight into how the minds of both sides work. I shudder to imagine what he could do if he got serious.

Additionally, it had been a while since I had done the deed itself, so I was worried that I might have gone a bit hard on Sera. Ever since Melfina began occupying my bed, I hadn’t had many opportunities to be alone with Efil. I did try my best to maintain that very last strand of my willpower, but I had completely lost myself with Sera before I knew it. In the end, I’d been reduced to nothing more than a ravenous wol—

“Nnn...”

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

Sera yawned and stretched. “Good morning...Kelvin...”

“Good morning, Sera. How are you feeling?”

“It still hurts a bit, but...I’ve never felt better.”

She smiled and planted a kiss on my cheek. *Okay, now I'm fully awake.*

"Looks like we overslept."

I checked the time and found that it was already past 9 am. Efil always woke me when I didn't get up on time myself, so it had been quite a while since I'd slept so late.

Hold on. Why didn't she come to wake me up today of all days? Because I wasn't sleeping in my own room? That can't be it. If it was time for breakfast, she'd definitely go looking for me. The door...is not locked. Oh shit, it's too late now, but I forgot to lock the door last night when I came in. Does that mean Efil saw Sera and me sleeping together naked and purposely chose not to disturb us?

"Kelvin? Why are you clutching your head?"

"Uh, don't mind me, I'm just trying to come to terms with our, uh, situation."

Am I looking at a scene of carnage on the horizon? Sylvia and her party members are supposed to be coming in the afternoon today. I've got to gauge what mood Efil is in by then — I don't think I'll be able to stand trying to guess her feelings the whole time she's with them!

"You're planning on fixing Arondight for me today, right? Um, would you mind if I stayed with you while you work on it?"

She squeezed me just a little bit harder with her hug. That slightly embarrassed look on her face really tickled my senses as a man, but my top priority at the moment was sorting out the current situation.

"Uh, right, the gauntlet that got banged up during your fight the other day, yeah? Um, sure, but let's grab breakfast first."

I gave her a gentle pat on the head, then got down from the bed and dressed myself.

"You should get dressed soon too," I urged. "Efil might put breakfast away if we're too late. We've got to find her and ask her to wait —"

I was trying very hard to come up with a legitimate reason to get Sera to follow my lead. I was aware that my words sounded quite monotone, but it was the best I could manage in my current state.

"Hm? There's no need to worry. After all," she pointed towards the door, "she's standing right outside."

Ugh, of course she would sense her there with all those detection skills of hers. Ha. Ha. Ha. Oh, who am I kidding. It's time to stop hiding from reality. I suppose this is the perfect example of the phrase "my heart is in my throat." I've gone so far past being surprised that I can't feel anything at all. "Yep, she's on the other side of the door" is all I can say now. Argh, what will happen will happen!

There was no time to get my panic under control, so I just went for it and threw the door open. All I wanted now was to resolve this as

quickly as possible. *I can only hope that the angelic Efil will be understanding!*

“Good morning, Master.”

As Sera had said, Efil was standing there in front of the door. She greeted me with her usual smile and soft tone.

“Good morning, ma’am!”

Although Efil was acting normal, my guilt pushed me to return her morning greeting like a little boy caught doing something wrong. A split second later, I was already kneeling on the floor in apology.

“Um, what are you doing, Master?”

“Aren’t you...mad at me?”

“Me? Mad?” Efil looked at me in puzzlement.

Oh, wow, she really isn’t. “You aren’t, um, mad at me for sleeping with Sera?”

“I am your maid, Master. I would not get mad at you over such matters.”

“Then why didn’t you wake us up today?”

“Because both of you seemed very tired. And I *can* read the mood. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“It’s fine if it’s only once in a while, but it would make me happy if you could give me some attention too. I’m also, um, holding myself back, so...” Her voice trailed off as she covered her mouth with her hand in embarrassment, her cheeks aflame.

I immediately enveloped Efil in a hug and whisked her into the room.

“Um, Master?”

My maid was, understandably, quite confused. I gently lowered her onto the bed next to Sera, who had only put on her lingerie so far.

“I feel like I should talk this out properly with both of you,” I said as I sat down on the edge of the bed. I looked straight into the eyes of each girl in turn. “Efil. Sera. I love both of you. I love both of you so much so that I can’t choose between you. You might think me unfaithful for saying this, but I do plan on loving both of you equally.”

The two of them stayed quiet, giving me their full attention.

“Would you still accept me, even under those circumstances?”

I thought I could hear the thumping of my own heart. I wasn’t sure whether I had managed to properly convey my feelings or not.

Sera and Efil exchanged a look then giggled at the same time.

“And here I was wondering what you were going to say, looking so serious and grim. There’s no problem at all!”

“I meant what I said earlier, Master. I also do not see this as a concern.”

“Are...you two sure about that?”

“I’m not saying I’m okay with just anyone, mind you. I’m fine with Efil because I trust her. Just so we’re on the same page!”

“Uh, right, okay.”

“Sera-san, I believe there might even be others joining us in the future. Mel-sama, for example, already declares herself to be his wife.”

“You’ve got to truly love the girl for us to accept her, Kelvin!”

In this way, I somehow managed to get through what I’d feared would be a bloodbath. In the worst case, I’d been prepared for death. *What a relief that it’s been resolved so peacefully.*

“In that case, I’d like to alleviate Efil’s worries right now.”

“What?”

I pushed both girls down onto the bed and climbed on myself.

“My worr— wait, here?! Now?!”

“Um, me too?”

“Of course. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be fair, right?”

“But Master, Sylvia-sama and her party will be coming in the afternoon.”

“Not a problem. We have plenty of time before then.”

“Umm, but, Master, umm...”

“Nope, there’s no getting out of this for either of you. If we go into overtime, I’ll make something up and apologize to them myself.”

“That’s not it, Master. Um, could you at least lock the door?”

I looked over, prompted by Efil’s words. True enough, the door was standing slightly ajar. Without speaking, I got off the bed, closed the door, turned the lock, and came right back.



“Oh wow, you really slept in today, Master! It’s already the afternoon, you know?”

When I finally reached the dining room, I found Ruka putting away the newly-washed dishes. *Looks like everyone already finished eating and left.*

“Guess I was pretty exhausted from yesterday. Are there any leftovers?”

“Sure, I’ll serve it now. Oh, Sera-sama! Efil-sama!” Ruka bowed to the two women who had entered the dining room behind me.

“Good morning. Can you get me something to eat too?” Sera asked, settling into a chair.

“Good morning! Please give me a second, I’ll do it really quick! Um, did something happen, Efil-sama?”

Ruka’s really honed her observation skills. Efil, you’re still grinning a little.

“Ahem. I will be getting on with preparations for the afternoon. Ruka, make sure to clean up properly afterwards.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Ah, she deflected that nicely.



“So...that mansion is Kelvin-san’s house?”

“Whoa, what an impressive place.”

“Mm. Very big.”

Ariel, Ema, and Sylvia voiced their first impressions in turn as Kelvin’s residence came into view down the road. Along the way, they’d had to make a few stopovers to satiate their leader’s appetite, but thankfully, they had managed to reach their destination in the end.

“Hah! That ain’t nothing,” spat a voice from behind them.

“Why are you even here, Nagua?” Ema asked.

“To keep an eye on Kelvin, obviously. There’s no telling what he’d do to Sylvia if I wasn’t around!”

Ariel sighed. “You are just so...ugh.”

In contrast to the others, Sylvia didn’t seem to quite understand what was going on.

“Well, since you’re already here, never mind,” Ariel continued.

“Just don’t cause any trouble, all right?”

“No need to tell me twice. You sure are naggy today.”

“Whose fault do you think that is?!”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough of the spousal comedy act,” Ema interrupted in a practiced fashion. She pointed down the street. “Look, the gates are just ahead.”

True enough, the entrance to the estate had come into view along with two suits of black armor seemingly standing guard on either side. In what appeared to be a display of incredible training, both were standing completely still, each holding a halberd in one hand. Their appearances seemed so similar to that of the veteran in Kelvin’s party, Gerard, that were it not for their heights, they could easily have been mistaken for the knight himself.

“Excuse me. I am Ema. I believe we have an appointment,” Ema said to one of the guards.

Its face turned towards her, and it broke its silence. “Ema-sama, Sylvia-sama, Ariel-sama. Prior notification from Master confirmed. Please pass through. The Head Maid, Efil-sama, awaits you.”

As the guard delivered its lines in what sounded like a strangely flat and drawn-out voice, the gates began opening all by themselves.

“Are these powered by magic? What an elaborate setup,” Ema murmured, sounding impressed. She grabbed Sylvia’s hand and walked on in. Ariel followed, giving the guards a quick bob of her head and a “thank you” as she passed.

Then Nagua stepped forward.

Clang!

“What the fuck is this?”

He found his way blocked by the two guards as they promptly crossed halberds.

“Apologies. We have no prior notification of your visit.

Confirming now. Please wait a moment.”

“The fuck? I’m Nagua. I’m with Sylvia. That good enough for you?”

“Apologies. Please wait a moment.”

“You seriously wanna have a go, huh?!”

The guards’ staunch refusal caused Nagua to flare up at once. He was convinced that today’s plans were nothing more than Kelvin luring Sylvia and the others to his house to lay hands on them after he had “landed” the Oracle, which had presumably gone to his head.

“Wait, Nagua. Stop,” Sylvia said with slight concern.

“Huh?! What is this, the tavern all over again?! Sylvia, you seriously think I would lose to a pair of guards?!”

“Uh...it’d be a close fight, maybe?”

Sylvia’s comment served to pour oil onto the flames without her realizing it. Nagua and the guards looked ready to break into a serious fight at the drop of a coin.

“Two. Three. Master has given his permission. Nagua-sama is an official guest. Let him through,” Efil ordered as she approached, rounding the fountain in the garden.

“Understood.”

“Understood.”

With perfected synchronized clanks, the two suits of armor resumed their previous stances.

“I’m terribly sorry for coming out to greet you so late. I also deeply apologize for our guards’ disrespect.”

“Oh, no, we’re the ones in the wrong for bringing Nagua along without prior notice! Come on, apologize!” Ariel tried to force Nagua’s head down, but he resisted her efforts with a sour-sounding “Keh!”

Efil smiled at the exchange and turned to lead the group into the house.

“Efil-san, thank you very much for today,” Ema said as she followed close behind the maid.

“Mm, very honored,” Sylvia added.

“Thank you for coming. I have been looking forward to this. Before we start, however, may I inquire as to how much experience you each have with cooking?”

“Embarrassingly, we aren’t very good at it,” Ariel replied. “I mean, if we had to describe what we’re each able to do...”

The three girls exchanged glances.

“I’m good at cutting things.”

“If it’s just grilling something with Red Magic...I won’t lose to anyone when it comes to firepower!”

“I, uh, know how to detoxify poison!”

Everything listed sounded more like random abilities, obtained for totally different reasons, being applied to cooking rather than having any actual experience with cooking itself.

Nagua snorted. “Honestly, Kokudori and I basically took turns while we were on the road. These three are pretty much hopeless when it comes to the kitchen, so you should prepare yourself for that. I’ve long since given up trying to teach them anything.”

“I...see. I shall do my best.”

As promised, Efil did her utmost, but it was to no avail. After many trials and tribulations, she ended up teaching cooking to Nagua alone.



“Man, I completely lost track of time there. I guess it’s true that time flies when you’re having fun.”

“Lately, you’ve started smiling while working on your golems too. I love your smile, Kelvin!”

Sera and I were climbing up from the underground area beneath our house. Repairing Arondight hadn’t taken nearly as long as expected, so the two of us had turned to the golems after that. What was meant to be a little casual tinkering had become a full-blown modification before I’d even realized it.

While working on the golems, Sera always donned a white lab coat. In all likelihood, she had picked up the practice from reading my mind and had asked Efil to make it for her. *I definitely did not force her or ask her to do it. I swear.*

We also discussed the new dungeon that Sera and the others had recently cleared out. Supposedly, it was a place with a ton of materi—I mean, monsters that seemed like puppets. While sweeping through the place, my companions had diligently collected the broken parts of those monsters and stuffed them into Clotho’s Storage. Upon examination, it turned out that quite a lot of what was gathered could indeed be used for our own golems.

When I spoke to Rion, who had fought these things firsthand...

“Oh, right, I remember this one. It was basically a Gatling gun except that it shot bullets of light, not physical projectiles.”

“Interesting. Maybe it’s a relic left behind by an otherworlder. But considering the speed and destructive power of what you described, it doesn’t seem like it would be all that useful to us. No, wait, hold on...”

The idea to add guns to our golems came to me then. And after some trial and error, the prototype was a success. Our normal golems, which were not possessed by souls and therefore could not make use of any skills, had previously had no way of utilizing magic. However, by equipping them with these magical Gatling guns, even they were now capable of long-range attacks. There were a few other usable parts, but that was our most impressive haul.

So I used my Analyze Eye to learn every last detail about the sample I had on hand, then had Clotho Absorb it and provide me with a steady supply of the same material using Metalicize and Division, which I used to mass-produce the guns with Smithing. Halfway through, I asked Sera and Melfina for help, and thanks to their proficiency in magic, even managed to develop an upgraded version.

This new item drew a bit too much magic to be used on the normal golems, so I was planning on strictly outfitting the upgraded ones — what I called the golems with souls — with them. Trycen's recent movements seemed more than a little fishy, so it wasn't a bad idea to bolster our defenses at home, just in case we had to set out in a hurry.

I also assigned names to our next-generation golems. Well, I say names, but it was literally just a numbering system, as in, One, Two, Three, and Four. All of them shared a single appearance, so I engraved their respective numbers onto the armors in order to tell them apart.

As for their fighting strength, I thought I had buffed them quite a bit, but I was having trouble finding opponents who could fight with them on equal ground. Gerard and Rion both took turns, but naturally, the golems didn't stand a chance against those two. Therefore, I did not actually know how strong they were compared to the average enemy.

Also of note was that Two and Three had been assigned to gate duty in place of the golems that Prettia had wrecked. Considering they were capable of rudimentary speech, in a way they were actually more suited to the job.

Sera suddenly looked around. "By the way, where's Mel? Wasn't she with us just now?"

"She went to the dining room first, saying she was hungry after working so hard."

"Ah, she wanted to try Sylvia and the others' food, right? I'm feeling a bit peckish myself. Let's go see what they've whipped up."

"Good idea."

We finally reached the stop of the stairs. *Oh, hey, something's smelling really good.*



Every single dish lined up on the table looked extremely appetizing. However, the person standing next to those dishes was not who I had expected.

“What? Why’re you here, Dog Man? And more importantly, why’re you wearing an apron?”

“Keh! Look at the state of ’em and connect the dots yourself.”

To my surprise, it was Nagua. Efil, Ema, and Ariel had their faces planted on the table, whereas Melfina and Sylvia had already started digging in.



“Not bad! Not bad at all!” the goddess declared.

“I knew it was smart to remain on the eating side. This is delicious, Nagua.”

“Yeah? Eat! Eat more!”

So, Nagua knows how to cook? Looks like it's business as usual for these two gluttons, anyway. As for the others...

“Efil, what happened here?”

“I’m sorry, Master,” she replied, sitting up but with her shoulders drooping. “It was too much for me to handle. There’s nothing more I can do.”

Whoa, it's my first time seeing her look so defeated.

Nagua snorted. “Sylvia and the others sucked so much that I took their place to learn from the maid here. I seriously have no idea how they can’t do something so fucking easy.”

“Ugh!”

“Ugh!”

“Hey, Dog Man, did you hear Ema and Ariel taking emotional damage from what you just said?”

So, Efil's feeling down because she had to give up on teaching these three? From the glimpse I got of the inside of the kitchen, she made the right choice. How the hell does a meal end up purple, anyway?



“You guys are leaving Parth tomorrow? Why not stay for a few more days?”

“We’d love to. But we have a ship to catch in Toraj.”

I had asked Sylvia and the rest about their plans over an early dinner, but they were in a hurry to make the crossing to the Western Continent.

“Delicious.”

“Efil’s food really is the best after all!”

Sylvia and Melfina were still in the middle of polishing off every dish on the table, the former in a silent, steady manner, the latter clapping a hand to her cheek and humming in delight. In fact, half the food on the table had already disappeared into their stomachs.

Ema and Ariel were still recovering, and Efil, having returned to life a while earlier, had ducked into the kitchen to cook some more. It hardly needed to be said, but most of the new foods were going straight into the two walking black holes that were dining with us.

The hazardous substances concocted by Ema and the rest had been slipped into Clotho’s Storage for fear of their noxious fumes staining the walls of the house. The plan was to perhaps throw them at an enemy in lieu of a weapon someday. *Seems like they’d be pretty*

effective, actually.

Ariel sighed. "Maybe I should just save up some points and pick up the Cooking skill myself."

"Don't you go wasting your points, idiot! You realize you're starting not from zero, but from a negative number, right?! You'd have to raise it to Rank B or even A just to do what the average person can!"

"To think a day would come when Nagua's the one speaking sense to me!"

During the dinner party at the restaurant, Ema and Ariel had been the only two from Sylvia's group to demonstrate proper dining etiquette, so I'd figured they were the types who were good at everything. *I guess you really can't judge people by their appearances.*

"Aww, you're leaving already, Sylvie?"

"You shall be missed, lass; you and your party."

"Look at you two joining the conversation so smoothly," I said to Rion and Gerard. "Where have you been?" *I know they weren't here a short while ago.*

"Ahaha...Danger Detection was warning me not to come near the kitchen, so I was observing from a distance. Alex says he still can't get close because of the smell in the air."

"Same here. I've already warned Ruka and Ellie to stay away, so don't worry, my king."

That bad, huh? Really highlights what a tough time Efil must have had. Oh, hey, why's Sera not touching her food?

"Sera, you've been quiet for a bit. What's wrong?"

"I was thinking...wouldn't Dog Man make for a good opponent for our golems?"

"Now that's an interesting idea."

"What was that about me?"

I explained our situation to Sylvia's party: in short, we had developed a new kind of golem and were looking for an opponent to measure its strength in battle against. *Nagua, we choose you.*

"The fuck? Why do I have to —"

"Sure thing!" Ariel interrupted. "He still has to pay you back for the cooking lesson, after all."

"I only learned from her 'cause all of you were so absolutely *shit* at it!"

"All right, we got permission! Take him away, Gerard!" Sera ordered.

My knight obediently lifted up the aproned beastkin man. "I'm sorry, my friend."

"Who the fuck you calling 'friend'?! Let me down!" Nagua flailed about desperately, but trying to escape Gerard's grip was an exercise

in futility.

“What are you saying?! Have you already forgotten the bonds of friendship we formed the night we went peeking together?!”

I looked up. “Peeking?”

“AHHHHHHHHH! I get it, already! Don’t say any more!”

I did notice them bonding that night, but I didn’t expect them to be that close already. Were they spying on Sylvia or something?

“Well then, I shall head down first, my king.”

“Fuck, why did things turn out this way...”

“Kelvin, let’s go too!”

Gerard went ahead with Nagua over his shoulder. Sera snaked an arm around mine and started pulling me after them.

“Hold on, hold on. If we’re going to watch Nagua and the golems fight, what is everyone else going to do?”

“Umm, I’ll take responsibility and clear all this food.”

“Honey, leave this to us and go on!”

“Ooookay, all right then.” *I guess Sylvia and Melfina are staying behind.*

Ariel turned to Ema. “What should we do?”

“Go ahead if you want to. The cooking might not have worked out, but there are bound to be other chances to make him notice you.”

“I...suppose you’re right. I’ll be off, then.”

“I’ll guide you! It’s this way!” Rion cried, grabbing Ariel’s hand and dragging her towards the staircase.

Is it just me or is there the hint of a romantic comedy in the air? And Ema is staying behind to help Efil with the cleanup? Uh...

Ema shot me a glare, seemingly having read my mind. “Cooking is the *only* chore I can’t do, mind you.”

“I...I see. Sorry for doubting you.”

I guess there’s no problem with that. As long as Efil isn’t burdened by any other unwelcome surprises.

“Feel free to go ahead, Master. It looks like Sera-san cannot wait much longer.”

Sera was looking at me with reproachful eyes, her cheeks puffed in displeasure. It was an expression that I very much wanted to snap a photo of, but I could tell that any further delay would not go well for me.

“Sorry, sorry. All right, Efil, please take care of things up here.”

“Of course, Master.”



“I...I did it...I won...”

“Yes, you did. Now let’s get you back soon so that you can rest.”

Ariel was currently lending her shoulder to Nagua, who seemed

entirely spent but had a very accomplished look on his face. His fight against one of our new golems had been a lot more exciting than expected, with both sides repeatedly taking and losing ground. Nagua had kept up with the golem's speed — despite the boost it had received from the Wind Jail Gems embedded in its body — and unleashed a constant barrage of punches against its black armor. In turn, the golem had displayed deft usage of its brand new Gatling gun, causing the match to last quite a while. In the end, the beastkin barely managed to snatch a close victory.

“Thank you for today,” Sylvia said. “Now our repertoire is much bigger than before.”

“You mean *my* repertoire, right?”

Look at that — he's still got the energy to argue. Hm? Why's Sylvia staring at me like that? “Is there something on my face?”

“Kelvin, do you want to come with us?”

“Me? Go with you guys? You mean, to the Western Continent?”

“Mm.”

As expected, Nagua could not let that pass. “Hold on, what are you saying, Sylvia?!”

The Western Continent. I mean, I do plan on going there eventually, but we have issues to resolve with Trycen at the moment. It probably isn't the best time for such a long journey. “I'm sorry, but we still have things we need to do here.”

“I see.”

“Thanks for the invitation, though.”

“It's okay. Let's meet again someday, Kelvin.”

“I'm sure we will.”

After that, Sylvia and her party headed back to their inn, departing against the backdrop of the setting sun. I heard later that they left town before sunrise the next day.



Yesterday had been yet another tiresome routine, thanks as always to Touya's many troubles.

I'm glad the frequency of his “encounters” seems to have declined a bit lately, but the fact that he's still causing such drama means that I continue to have to clean up after him. What is it about him that makes him such a magnet for trouble, anyway? But hey, it's a whole new day with perfect weather and a clear, blue sky. I'm sure that today, at least —

Click.

“Setsuna! You have to see this!”

“Never mind. Here we go again.”

The door to my room banged open to reveal Touya, who was waving something in his hand.

He said he'd be visiting the Adventurer's Guild first thing in the morning, didn't he? I think I know better than to hope for the best by now, but please don't let it be more trouble.

"You seriously have to see this, Setsuna! It was just issued!!"

"What is it?"

"Do you even have to ask?! It's an article about Teacher's Rank S promotion, duh! Look, they were passing them out at the guild!"

An article was thrust into my hands with vigor. It was after our ship had set off from Toraj that Touya had started referring to Kelvin as "Teacher," as if he fancied himself a student of the adventurer.

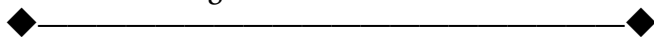
Although he's not entirely wrong there, the same logic would make Captain Cliff his teacher as well, wouldn't it? If I had to venture a guess, this is definitely the result of Miyabi telling him about some unnecessary tradition again. Anyway, let's see what the article says.

"Let me take a look."

◆——Birth of a New Rank S Adventurer!——◆

A Rank S adventurer has been promoted in Parth, the City of Peace. Kelvin-sama is, astonishingly, an adventurer who registered at the guild only three months ago. This is the fastest recorded promotion to Rank S of all time. Furthermore, his strength has been proven by his defeat of Sylvia-sama, the incumbent Rank S adventurer also known as Ice Princess, during his recent exhibition match.

It is only natural to be curious about the alias of this up-and-comer. And indeed, it has just been announced by the Adventurer's Guild: in light of Kelvin-sama's preferred weapon being an enormous scythe, his black robe, and his characteristic grin, he has been granted the alias of "Grim Reaper." This does sound like a rather ominous name, but according to testimonies from the residents of Parth, Kelvin-sama himself is a polite, amicable young man. We have also received reports that he and his party have already defeated several Rank S monsters in the past. Keep your eyes peeled for the future successes of this new rising star.



So, Kelvin-san really has made the news. From what I knew, Rank S was the realm of superhumans, eccentrics, and oddballs. We had grown significantly stronger ourselves since journeying to the Western Continent, but Kelvin had clearly reached even higher heights in the meantime. This gossip column about him in the margin also seems interesting...

"Kelvin-san really is amazing."

"He sure is! But we're going to catch up to him one day!"

"Yeaah..."

We had been spending practically every day training diligently. However, in regards to the prophecy that Colette had received from the Goddess about the next Demon Lord showing up in Rizea...well, we had yet to find even the faintest whisper of such an event. At present, the empire was the very picture of peace.

Should we really be staying on this side of the world?

A separate article had fallen out from between the pages of the main article. Neither of us had noticed it at first, but this was its title:

◆———Trycen Declares War on the Eastern Continent———◆

Chapter 4: Declaration of War

After consecutive days of merrymaking, the City of Peace was beginning to settle back down. With the official festivities over, the majority of visiting VIPs had already set out for their home countries, and the number of those who had stayed a while longer to do some sightseeing was dwindling by the day.

Unbeknownst to almost everyone, there was a secret room beneath the venue where Kelvin's promotion ceremony had been held. There a clandestine conference was currently taking place.

"So, you are in agreement with them, Tsubaki-dono?"

"Indeed. There have been skirmishes on our own border as well, in spite of our long-time relationship as active trading partners. It does make me curious, though...given how harsh and unforgiving their land is, how did Trycen manage to gather sufficient reserves to feed themselves without commerce?"

The voices belonged to King Leonhart Gaun of Gaun and Queen Tsubaki Fujiwara of Toraj. The crystals that had been used to project their voices during Kelvin's promotion ceremony were now placed atop a table, allowing them to communicate privately.

"It is hard to imagine that the recent appearance of unnaturally powerful monsters and Trycen's concerning movements are mere coincidence. It is only logical to infer that the Demon Lord has indeed been born there."

"The Adventurer's Guild also thinks this extremely likely. The various branches within Trycen have reported significant interference and pressure from the country, which is greatly inhibiting the movements of their members."

These other two voices were those of the Oracle of Deramis, Colette Deramilius, and Rio, the guildmaster of Parth, who was representing the entire Adventurer's Guild. As far as the public knew, Colette had already returned home using the teleportation gate. In truth, however, she had made her way to this underground chamber, representing her country in an off-the-record conference between the major powers of the Eastern Continent.

As a tradition that had remained unbroken ever since the signing of the treaty after the Great War, this conference would normally see the attendance of a representative from Trycen as well. However, that seat was currently empty.

“How long has it been since Zel-dono last made an appearance at these meetings?” Tsubaki asked in a small grumble. “He has always been a man to keep your guard up around, but I had thought him wiser than this foolishness. No matter how much he has expanded his army, attempting to take on the entirety of the continent is reckless and ill-advised.”

“According to the records, those who become Demon Lords have been corrupted by malice,” Colette replied. “The same goes for intelligent monsters, as it does also for merciful humans. In all likelihood, the King of Trycen is...”

“I know, I just wanted to complain a little. My scouts have told me something along those lines already. Leonhart-dono, it looks like they went at you in a rather flashy way, did they not?”

“I could say the same to you. The Black Wind incident was not that long ago, was it? But aside from the large-scale invasion of the Village of Elves, the usual skirmishes we have with the Trycenians have also gone up significantly. To keep it short, I share the suspicions the three of you are harboring. Trycen’s movements of late have been truly irregular. Ever since Kelvin protected the elves, I’ve been having my sons patrol our borders. They’ve succeeded in capturing and questioning several Trycenian officers to date, and the information gleaned has been rather disturbing and worrying. If we do not move soon, the damage we suffer will only continue to grow. Although Trycen is a fellow signatory of the treaty, it’s high time we took action. We do not have the leisure of gathering indisputable proof that Zel is the Demon Lord before proceeding.”

A hush fell for a time. No one spoke up to offer either support or a refusal of Leonhart’s words. They all knew the truth, even if they did not want to admit it. They could feel that the time for dialogue had passed, and the time when war was the only remaining recourse was nigh.

Finally, Tsubaki broke the silence. “If we are to strategize based on the assumption that Zel-dono has become the Demon Lord, we will need the power of the Heroes of Deramis. Colette-dono, where are they now?”

The Oracle answered quietly. “As per the prophecy bestowed by Melfina-sama, they are...currently on the Western Continent.”

“The Western Continent?” Leonhart echoed with some alarm. “It’s going to take a fair amount of time to call them back!”

“Deramis will not be calling them back. For us, the prophecies from the Goddess are absolute. Until the Heroes discover the meaning behind Melfina-sama’s request that they journey to the Western Continent, we will not initiate any action from our side.”

“But Oracle —”

“Hold on a moment,” Tsubaki cut in, interrupting Leonhart’s protest. “A missive from Trycen has just reached me.”

“And its contents are?”

The sound of paper crinkling could be heard over the communication crystal, followed by a heavy sigh. In a grim tone, she replied, “It’s finally arrived. Leonhart-dono, Colette-dono, I believe you shall be receiving the same in short order.”

“Are you saying...”

“Trycen has declared war on us all.”



The capital of Trycen — a sprawling city surrounding Castle Trycen — was currently packed with the country’s citizens. They were there in response to the sudden summons the king had sent out by way of the soldiers a short while earlier. Dragon knights circled the sky in a display of vigilance, and the people were buzzing furiously with speculations about the irregular situation.

“Silence! The glorious King of Trycen will be speaking presently! Silence!” shouted a highly decorated officer.

As his voice rang out, the gathered masses quickly grew quiet, and they adopted the Trycenian salute in perfect synchrony. Naturally, this included the women, children, and elderly. As a result of the national education that had been pounded into their bodies and minds from a young age, there was no hesitation whatsoever in the movements of the nation’s people.

The generals and lieutenant generals in attendance nodded in satisfaction at the sight. After an officer confirmed that all the citizens had been gathered, he turned to signal the castle. The King of Trycen soon appeared on the balcony above. Beside him was his daughter and General of the Black Ops, Shutola Trycen. Someone gulped loudly enough to be heard in the silence. Here, the royal family was an absolute authority. Even the slightest disrespect was punishable by death.

“My beloved subjects, today I bring you a matter of great urgency.”

Every word uttered by King Zel resounded in the people’s hearts. He was not shouting nor was he using a magical item that amplified his voice. Despite this, the entirety of the city could clearly hear what he was saying from where he stood near the top of his home. It was almost as if he were speaking directly into their minds.

“Just the other day, General Clive Teraaze of our proud Magic Knight Order was ambushed by Gaunian forces and killed in the line of duty. At the hands of the vicious demihumans, no less, in the middle of a patrol to preserve the peace of the citizens that he so

loved! It has been confirmed that the cowardly assault happened in the dark of night, when the entire camp was fast asleep with fatigue after a full day of subjugating monsters.”

The masses gasped at the shocking news. King Zel’s speech had, of course, taken significant liberties with the truth, but those listening were none the wiser, having no cause to doubt the veracity of their ruler’s words.

“Clive-sama is gone? It can’t be!”

“How appalling!”

Naturally, none of those present were privy to the late general’s true nature. To the public, he was a charming youth gifted with both intelligence and looks who had been making a meteoric rise through the ranks.

“I understand your anger. Indeed, I feel as if I am on the verge of losing myself in righteous fury. We demanded that Gaun turn over those responsible so that justice could be served, repeatedly attempting to find a way to resolve this in a peaceful manner. However, the Beast King has rebuffed all our attempts. Not only did he refuse to deal with us as equals, he had the gall to cut down our noble messengers! This is as unforgivable as the behavior of Toraj and Deramis, who are keeping our champion, Christoph, behind bars, branding him a *bandit* of all things! My dear citizens, what do you think of this?!”

“Down with the cowardly demihumans!”

“Show no mercy to the beasts of Gaun!”

“Deramis and Toraj are just as guilty!”

“No country that accepts demihumans can be trusted!”

Once one man uttered his anger, those around him exploded with similar sentiments. Zel raised a hand to silence the crowd, continuing his speech.

“You are correct. We might be a patient and understanding people, but that does not mean we will allow other countries to trample all over us. Long ago, after the Great War, we signed a treaty in hopes of peace and reconciliation. However, this peace turned out to be an imperfect one. This is the moment when we must strike out onto the path that leads to *true* peace. We, the country of Trycen, hereby declare war on all of our neighbors and must commence the unification of the entire continent!”



As a strange air enveloped the country of Trycen, and its capital shook under the roars of the people and the cheers of the soldiers, Shutola retreated into the castle and walked off alone, the king’s speech still booming behind her. Although she knew for a fact that his

words were fabrications, the power of his voice was even seeping into her mind, making her doubt herself, attempting to twist her own understanding of reality. She could not bear to be out there for a moment longer.



Has General Dan successfully made contact with Lunoir yet?

Shutola had charged Dan, the person she trusted most, to deliver a letter to the girl who had changed her name to Sylvia. The contents of that message had been a warning to leave the Eastern Continent as soon as possible. Or, to be precise, the letter had contained whatever thoughts Shutola could come up with to convince her old friend to make her way to the Western Continent without actually alerting her of the coming war. She had not only done this for Lunoir, but had also been pulling strings in every one of their neighboring countries.

Once the war begins, even the Adventurer's Guild will become our enemy. And by extension, Lunoir too...

It was true that Shutola did not want to cross swords with Lunoir and Ashley because of their past friendship. However, there was a calculative motive there as well, as it was her duty to eliminate everything that would harm Trycen's future efforts, and there was no telling how much damage a Rank S adventurer and another of similar strength could inflict.

Look at me, seeing my friends as mere pawns on the battlefield. What a terrible person I've become.

As the princess continued walking, she found a man standing in her way.

"Esteemed Brother Tabura, this place is off limits to those without express permission to be here."

"Hmph! You're as arrogant as ever, Shutola."

The man who was acting so high-handedly towards her was the only one of her elder brothers with whom she shared both a father and mother with. This was the very same prince who had once caused a commotion in Parth and been knocked down a peg for it by Kelvin.

"It will be on your own head should Father find you here. I will pretend that I did not see you. Now would be a good time to take your leave."

"You sure about speaking to me like that? Even though I bring information that would be valuable to you and the Black Ops?"

"Information, you say."

"Listen and be astonished! I have information on Kelvin, the man who was recently promoted to Rank S in Parth! Based on what Father is saying out there, Trycen is declaring war on the other nations, right? In that case, the Adventurer's Guild is bound to move as well. Since this Kelvin has only just reached Rank S, I doubt you have all that much information on him. But you can rest assured with my help. After all, I have had my eye on him for quite some time —"

"Your concern is unnecessary. I have collected every piece of information available on him since Christoph was taken into custody,

so I doubt I need anything that you can provide.”

“That’s right, which is exactly why you should be grateful to me and listen — wait, what did you say?”

“I already know everything there is to know about him from the guild, his presence in Parth, and his presence in Toraj. Every detail about him is most certainly remarkable. However, with his Status under constant Concealment, there is much that seems to require further confirmation, but...in any case, I do believe that I already possess any details you might have gathered.”

“I-In that case, how about information on other Rank S adventurers? I have a huge stock based on the digging I’ve been doing on these people for quite a while now. I managed to sneak one of my men into the stands to watch the practice match the other day. We can start with Goldiana and the other Rank S adventurer who just appeared in public for the first time, Sylvia —”

Shutola sighed heavily. “Esteemed Brother, aside from Kelvin, the Rank S adventurers present that da— never mind. Satella.”

“Present.”

“What?!”

At Shutola’s command, Satella, a black-clad woman who served as the lieutenant general of the Black Ops, seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“My brother wishes to return to his room. Kindly escort him.”



Yesterday, Deramis, Gaun, and Toraj announced Trycen’s declaration of war. With this, the peace obtained at the end of the Great War was shattered, and the Eastern Continent was once again plunged into a maelstrom of conflict.

Parth was no exception; the same missive had reached the City of Peace. Significant mayhem soon broke out amongst the residents of the city, but it settled down before long thanks to clear and easy-to-understand explanations from each country regarding the countermeasures being planned. Even so, there were a number of residents and adventurers packing up to move to Deramis, the farthest location from their new enemy.

Today, the highest-ranked adventurers currently residing in Parth had been called to the Adventurer’s Guild in order to work out the details of our collective response to the impending threat. Naturally, I, having been promoted to Rank S, was in attendance, as was the rest of my party.

Also in attendance were Prettia, who had remained in town after the recent festivities; Uld-san and his party of veterans, who had finally reached Rank B not long before; and Sabato, a Rank A

adventurer who headed a six-member party of his own. All of them were beastkin, and their specialty was close-quarters combat using their impressive nimbleness and speed. True to his rank, Sabato was as strong as Touya had been back in Toraj, as far as I could tell.

“Oh, man, you’re actually Kelvin! I saw your match! If you’re here, it means Parth’s safety is guaranteed!”

“Being told that straight to my face is kind of embarrassing. Uhh, we haven’t actually met, have we?”

“Ack, look at me, forgetting to introduce myself. I’m Sabato. I might not look like it, but I’m Rank A. My party and I were going through the new dungeon discovered by that pretty companion of yours over there — it’s now been named Shrine of the Puppets, if you didn’t know — when we got caught up in this whole mess. What a terrible day, right? Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Ah, the new place that branches out from Clayworm Passages. I’ve been thinking about visiting it myself, but it seems like he’s beaten me to it. And wait, Sera is considered the person who discovered it?

My demon companion looked up. “What? Me?”

Even she sounds surprised by that.

“Man, you really are surrounded by beauties on all sides. I thought they were just escorts you hired when I saw them with you at the promotion ceremony.”

“I’m aware that I’m pretty privileged in that regard.”

“Can’t tell you how jealous I am, man. My party only has this gorilla-like wom—*anpffft!*”

Sabato was promptly sent flying with a punch from the beastkin woman he was pointing at. *She looks plenty cute, though, beast ears and all. Although clearly, she does have gorilla-like strength.*

“Huff, huff, huff...ugh...you see what I mean? Goddammit, Goma.”

You still look pretty energetic for someone who just crashed head first into a wall. I guess that’s to be expected of a Rank A adventurer.

“Even I can tell that was your bad,” I said. “So, aren’t you guys adventurers from Gaun? You sure you don’t need to return home? They’re also under attack, right?”

“You’re gonna move on just like that? Uh, Gaun has the Beast King, so it’ll be fine. He’s as much of a monster as you are, after all. Parth is the place with the least amount of fighting strength, so that’s why we’re staying to help out here!”

Talk about a larger-than-life personality. Are all beastkin like this? On a different note, aside from our party, everyone here sure makes for a total sausa— never mind, scratch that.

Upon seeing that all the players were present, Rio began his speech. “Thank you for gathering on such short notice, everyone. I’m sorry for the lack of warning, but I’m sure you understand the urgency

of the situation.”

“Oh, psh, none of us mind, Rio-chan,” Prettia replied reassuringly. “Trycen’s picking a fight with us all, right? I imagine the other countries are scrambling about in the same way.”

“So, what is it you want us adventurers to do? And what’s the exact situation?” I asked.

“As I’m sure you have already heard, even Parth has received a declaration of war, despite the treaty expressly forbidding it. What I think you *don’t* know, however, is that Trycen dispatched their military forces at the same time they sent the letters. They certainly aren’t pulling any punches.”

“Already?!” *When speaking of Trycen’s army, the Mixed Monster Order that we encountered at the Village of Elves comes to mind. Oh, right, and then there’s Clive, the general of the Magic Knight Order who I allowed to escape. I think we did quite a number on those two orders already, didn’t we?*

“Trycen’s attack is three-pronged. First, they have their Steel Knight Order heading towards Gaun. Next is their Magic Knight Order, which is marching on Toraj. The one that they are sending to Parth is their Dragon Knight Order.”

So, the Magic Knight Order is already back up and running? Clive sure is a tough customer.

Uld stroked his chin. “The Dragon Knight Order is the one led by Trycen’s Crown Prince Azgrad, as I recall. That’s the fastest one among the three orders they are sending out. I’ve also heard that Azgrad himself is quite the warmonger. Are they planning on finishing us off as quickly as possible in order to raise the morale of their troops on the other two fronts?”

Sabato crossed his arms. “So, we’ll be fighting just outside the city?”

“According to reports, they will reach us in a week’s time.”

Dragon knights? Trycen sure has interesting-sounding troops. The only experience I have with fighting dragons would be the evil one in Toraj and the whelp, Mun-chan, from Touya’s party. Although they are said to be one among the trio of “most powerful races” in this world — along with angels and demons — I haven’t had much trouble dealing with them so far. The one we killed was technically Rank S, but I guess it wasn’t a proper dragon in the full sense of the word?

::Honey, want me to fill you in on the different kinds of dragons?::
Yes, please, Melfina-sensei!

::Ahem. Dragons are classified based on their maturity levels and the elements that they are best at. There are also subdragons, races that bear a resemblance but are much weaker than true dragons. Here, I’ll list them according to strength.::

A memo popped up on the Network: Subdragons (Rank C & lower) ≤ Young Dragons (also called whelps) (Rank C ~ Rank B) < Dragons (Rank A) < Ancient Dragons (Rank S) < Dragon Kings (Rank S).

::From there, the races are further broken down according to their elemental affinities. The beast that you defeated in Toraj was a subdragon. Although its stats were higher than normal, its intelligence was severely impaired.::

Right, it was a pretty easy battle because it basically relied on brute strength. So, what's the difference between ancient dragons and dragon kings? You listed them both as Rank S.

::Dragon kings are the most powerful ancient dragons, those that stand at the top of their races. There is one dragon king for each element, which means there are eight of them in this world.::

There are eight "top" dragons? Sounds like they're going to be a pain to deal with.

::In case there is any confusion, allow me to rephrase: there is one king for each elemental race. Furthermore, while there are those like the Flame Dragon King, who inflict terror and disaster, there are also those like the Water Dragon King, who is worshiped as a guardian by Toraj. Not all of them are necessarily hostile towards humans.::

Okay, I see. We have a personal score to settle with the Flame Dragon King, so we're definitely going to beat his ass up on sight, but I suppose that means we wouldn't have to fight the dragons that are friendly to us. We...wouldn't have to fight them...right...

::You sound disappointed.::

A bit, maybe. But anyway, let's get back to the meeting. This high-speed instantaneous communication thing is great and all, but I should probably focus.

Rio was still talking. "Unfortunately, we have almost no standing army here in Parth. All we have are those guarding the walls and patrolling the streets. As such, the adventurers will need to form the backbone of our forces. Gaun and Toraj will be shoring up their own defenses with their respective armies, but Deramis is going to be sending us troops to reinforce our front. That said, chances of them arriving before the Dragon Knight Order does are almost zero. Our mission, therefore, is to buy time using the forces that we currently have available."

"So, basically, being peaceful has come to bite us in the butt," I murmured.

The teleportation gate popped into my mind, but I immediately dismissed the idea, recalling its ridiculous MP cost. It was highly unsuitable for moving entire armies. *If Deramis is to use the gate, they can only send us a small group of their best and finest. But sending too much of their strength to another country isn't a smart thing to do right*

now. Although the two are technically in a ceasefire, Deramis also has Rizea constantly looming at its back.

“Buy time? Can’t say I like the idea. We have *two* Rank S adventurers on our side. Why don’t we bring the fight to them instead?” *Oh, hey, sounds like Sabato and I might get along.*

“Oh my, you sure know what to say to make me happy! But I might not be as strong as you’re imagining, dearie.”

“You make a fair point, Sabato-kun,” Rio replied. “I also believe we have enough fighting strength to deal with the matter. However, what we don’t have are the numbers, and this is a defensive battle. The best compromise would be for a small group of elites to strike off and engage the Dragon Knight Order some distance from the city. You watched Kelvin-kun’s practice match in person, yes? Can you imagine what would happen if attacks of that level were to be unleashed close to Parth? Without the protection of the Oracle’s barrier?”

“Ahhh...okay, that would suck.”

Why are you looking at Prettia and me like that, Sabato? If you want to make Rank S yourself, you’ve got to stop looking up to us and try to be more like us, you know?

“So, I’m thinking of separating all of you into a defense group and an interception group. The defense group would be, as its name implies, the one that remains in Parth to serve as the final line of defense. The adventurers ranked C and lower will all be stationed here. The job of the interception group is to hit the Trycenians with guerrilla attacks and delay them as much as possible. Needless to say, that is the more dangerous role by far.”

Rio, can you not stare right at me while explaining the role of the interception group? I can bet you’ve already made up your mind about who you want to assign where.

Prettia spoke up first. “I would love to stay with Gerard-sama, but unfortunately my abilities are much more suitable for defending than for attacking. Looks like I’ll be volunteering myself for defense.”

“Having been promoted to Rank B only recently, dealing with subdragons is the most we can do,” Uld said. “If we were to join the interception team, we’d only get in the way. Therefore, our place is also with the defense group. If it comes to it, we can help to guide the residents in case of an evacuation and guard them along the way.”

Guess we won’t have to worry about the city if they’re staying behind.

“We’ve gotten through our fair share of battles, but admittedly, we can’t measure up to what we saw during that match the other day,” Sabato confessed before whirling towards me. “But still, this is a priceless and irreplaceable opportunity to see a Rank S adventurer fighting up close. Kelvin, feel free to use us for odd jobs or whatever you need! Please allow us to come with you!”

Wait, so it's a given that we'll be in the interception group? I mean, I was planning on volunteering for it anyway, so I guess there's no problem.

"If you feel like it, you can even take Goma to bed — oh wait, you wouldn't need herrrrrrr?!"

Damn, right out the window? Cool demonstration of the Doppler effect, though.



Ultimately, the interception group ended up being my team and Sabato's party. According to our estimates, it was going to take the Dragon Knight Order a week to reach Parth, which meant that we still had a bit of time. So, after parting with Sabato's group, we returned home for a strategy meeting.

Sera might be rolling around on the sofa, and Melfina might be wolfing down baked snacks, but this is definitely still a strategy meeting!

"You will be heading out to battle, then, Master?"

"Master, are you okay?"

Ellie and Ruka looked rather worried as I finished bringing them up to speed.

"If our enemies are on the level of the Mixed Monster Order that we fought off last time, there's absolutely no cause for concern. But honestly, even I can't say how things are going to go here. The scouts reported seeing several figures that could be ancient dragons."

All in all, it sounded like the order had a wide variety of creatures at their disposal, including a large black one and a rock dragon that ran on the ground. The majority of the troops, however, were riding subdragons like wyverns, so it wasn't as if they were all paired up with "proper" dragons.

Either way, it's hard to say anything definite before we take a look for ourselves.

"Oh, right. I should add you two back into our party. Should help you gain quite a few levels, I imagine," I offered, sending the party invitation command to the mother and daughter.

"We would be much obliged for the chance to earn levels without doing anything, but are you sure about that, Master?"

"Don't sweat it. After all, your Statuses aren't suitable for battle. Indirectly acquiring XP through the party system is pretty common, isn't it?"

The only way to earn more skill points was to level up. However, most people lived normal lives behind city or village walls and had no experience at all with fighting monsters. So how were they supposed to gain levels? It was a simple matter: they had to hire an adventurer party who would temporarily let them in and then go kill monsters for them. It was such a commonly accepted practice that the people of

this world had even made an annual event of partying up children who had recently come of age.

Normally, the person who delivered the final blow to a monster would receive the most XP, after which the remainder would be distributed among the other party members according to their individual contributions. The members of the party who did nothing would get only a miniscule portion of the points, but it was still a significant amount for those at the lowest levels.

It was possible to get as high as Level 5 with this method, which was commonly referred to in gaming as “leeching.” There was a sharp jump in the amount of XP required for Level 6, however, which made it impractical to level any further as the amount of points trickling down was the bare minimum, regardless of the level of the monster being killed. Consequently, it was generally understood that if one wanted to reach Level 6 or higher, one would need to directly participate in the fighting in some way.

“When you do it, however, Master, you tend to go overboard.”

In our case, we basically have all the benefits of that method without the negatives, thanks to the Experience Sharing skill.

“Well, if you want, how about we give you two a bit of combat training sometime? For self-protection.”

“My king, I can teach them the sword!”

“The sword! Will you teach me, Grandpa Gerard?!”

Both Ruka and the knight seemed extremely excited about the idea. *Why do I feel like it wouldn't stop at just self-protection? Which wouldn't really be a problem, I suppose. Oh, well.*

“In that case, I'll also lend a hand!” Rion offered. “Let's learn how to shoot Agito together!”

“Yay! Agitoooo!” Ruka started doing pretend practice swings in an impressive imitation of Gerard. *Maybe a future where our maids are capable of sending flying slashes all over the place isn't that far off.*

“This is for after we successfully protect Parth, though. While we're gone, feel free to use the golems in the house as you see fit, Ellie. I don't think it will actually come to it, but there might be troops who manage to slip past the defensive line. Sera, stop dozing off. Mel, stop staring at that empty plate; you already ate everything on it. It's about time we get this strategy meeting started for real.”

I signaled for Efil to spread out the map we had borrowed from Rio, which showed the area around the border of Parth, then we got serious about discussing our game plan for the coming battle.



“Sabato-sama, are you really taking us along?”

After Kelvin had told them, “Once we get a few things in order,

we'll contact you," and they had parted ways at the guild, Sabato and his party had returned to their inn to kill a bit of time.

"We have no choice but to believe in Kelvin for now, right? Instead of us racking our pea-sized brains, it'd be much more efficient to wait for his group to do the thinking and follow their lead."

Goma sighed. "You'll never become the next Beast King if you keep saying things like that, Sabato. Even now, our brothers are at the border, fighting against Trycen."

"Oh, get off my case already. We said we were leaving on a journey to get stronger; we can't just show up back home without actually having achieved anything. And it is true that Parth's in a crisis right now. What kind of Beast King candidate would abandon people in trouble?"

"Currently, we're the ones *causing* Kelvin-san trouble, aren't we?"

"Goma-sama's hit the nail on the head!" guffawed a beastkin man who, with scars all over his body and half an ear gone, looked every bit the part of a veteran warrior.

"Godammit, I can't beat her with words."

"You can't beat her in physical combat either, Sabato-sama. *Ouch!*"

A clear *slap* resounded as the beastkin who had just spoken pressed down on the top of his head, a wounded expression on his slightly doltish face.

Just then, the bell at the door of the inn clanged loudly, signifying someone's entrance. The six beastkin turned to look, expecting it to be Kelvin arriving to pick them up.

"Excuse me, is Sabato-sama a guest at this inn?"

Instead, it was a pretty lady wearing a maid outfit. The first thing she did was head for the innkeeper and ask for Sabato by name.

Goma narrowed her eyes. "Isn't that the same outfit worn by the maid in Kelvin-san's party?"

"Ohhhh, it is, it is! There's no doubt! I remember her 'cause she was super cute!"

"Guin, I agree with you there, but I believe what Goma-sama meant to say is that this maid was quite possibly sent here on Kelvin-dono's orders."

"Ahhhhh! Both Goma-sama and Akgas-san are so damn smart!"

"You're just slow on the uptake. So, Sabato-sama, what wi—"

"I'M SABATO!" Sabato shouted and leaped up before Akgas could finish his sentence. His behavior was reminiscent of a dog who had finally been told to eat a treat after being made to sit and wait first.

"I guess it's true that idiots are always the first to move," Goma murmured, sighing once more.

Both the innkeeper and the maid flinched at Sabato's shout. He

had succeeded in surprising them for no reason whatsoever.

“I-I see. My apologies for not recognizing you. I am Ellie, a maid in Kelvin-sama’s service.” The woman bowed, trying to regain her composure.

“It’s fine; it’s totally fine! So, what is Kel—*vuunpeh!*”

Guin continued to slurp his noodles as he watched Sabato fly through the air. “Wow, that’s the third time today, Sabato-sama! You’re on a roll!”

“I’m not sure that ‘on a roll’ is the right phrase here,” Akgas replied under his breath.

“Sorry about that,” Goma continued with a bright smile. “So, what is your business here?”

At this point, the maid was as pale as a sheet. With trembling fingers, she held out an envelope. “I-I am here to deliver a letter from Kelvin-sama. H-Here you go.”

“A letter?”

“What’s it say?”

“Gulp. Delish. Hey, I wanna see too!”

“Huff, huff...me...too...”

◆————◆
To Sabato:

Turns out we don’t have as much time as we thought, so we’re going ahead to the interception point first. Once you’re done making your own preparations, come meet up with us. We’ll be at the Grand Scarlet Canyon on the Parth-Trycen border. Let’s give it our all! See ya then!

◆————◆
The entire group froze as the same thought ran through each of their minds.

We got left behind?! they screamed inwardly in disbelief.

Side Story: The Phantom Springs of Toraj

The hustle and bustle from the festivities had largely petered out, and Sylvia and her party had already left town. As my own party had practically jumped right into preparations for the ceremony immediately after our return from the Village of Elves, this was pretty much the first breather we'd had since then.

Muahaha, I refuse to take a single step outside my workshop for the entire day today!

From the moment I'd woken up, I had been cackling with laughter. Internally, of course. I took care to not let the exhilaration leak onto my face or into my mannerisms.

"You look like you're in a great mood today, Master," Efil said suddenly as she helped me to change.

Hahaha, looks like I can't fool her even though I've disconnected myself from the Network! My maid really knows me well!

"I'm looking forward to finally being able to take some time out to work on new equipment for everyone and mod our golems. How about you also take the day off, Efil? We've had a lot happening pretty much back to back. You should rest up when you can."

"Thank you for your concern, Master. I'd love to say 'I might just take you up on that' but first, there is something I wish to give you."

"Hm?"

Efil did one last check to confirm that I was good to go, then took something out of her chest pocket.

"A letter?"

"Yes, Master. I received notification of a visitor from the guards at the gate early this morning. It was a Torajian envoy who attended your promotion ceremony."

"A Torajian envoy...that means someone sent by Tsubaki-sama, I take it?" *Another letter? That queen sure sends a lot of them. Am I encouraging her by conscientiously replying to each and every one of them? At this point, it's almost like we've become pen pals or something. Or maybe not, seeing as a large portion of our correspondence is just her soliciting me and my subsequent deflections.*

"Honestly, I'm starting to run out of ways to politely say no. But I feel like it'd be rude to have the guild do it on my behalf," I murmured as I stared at the wax Torajian national seal and the

impressive-looking kanji (椿) for “Tsubaki” written in an ink brush. I groaned and pushed my sluggish mind to fully wake up.

“How about taking a look at the letter before deciding what to do with it?” Efil suggested. “Perhaps it is something other than a solicitation this time.”

“I suppose so...” *Let’s take a peek, then think it over while eating breakfast*, I decided as I opened the envelope. *Wait, are these...*

“You’ve gone quiet, Master. Is something the matter?”

“Oh, sorry about that. I was just taken by surprise is all.”

“Are the contents that unusual?”

“Mh-hm. Sorry for the trouble, but please gather everyone in the dining room. I’ll explain while we eat.”

I took out the contents of the envelope and showed them to her by flapping them like a fan.

“Oh, my! I mean, yes, Master. I’ll do so at once.”

I did not miss the sparkles that had filled Efil’s eyes for a brief moment. In contrast to her usual composure, she was practically skipping when she exited the room.

What a great start to the day!



I dug into my breakfast while I waited for everyone to gather. As expected — *or should I say, “as predetermined”?* — the last one down was Melfina. If left alone, she could have easily slept well into the afternoon, so halfway through the meal, we all embarked upon a quest to rouse her from her slumber.

There was no telling what a feral beast would do when its sleep was interrupted, so we approached the task with the caution of facing a Rank S monster. As the one who had survived her Spartan one-on-one training sessions, I was forced to take point. Thankfully, we completed our mission with me only losing one of my arms.

“Hot springs?”

“That’s right. In Toraj.” I continued to heal my arm as everybody stared at the “Stay for free at the Phantom Springs of Toraj!” tickets spread out on the table. “Tsubaki-sama sent them as a congratulatory gift for my promotion.”

These tickets had been enclosed with the letter, which claimed to have been penned not by a head of state, but by a friend.

Of course, I fully believe in the friendship between the two of us! So I have to accept this present, since it’s from a friend! What? There are undertones of solicitation in the part of the letter mentioning four extra tickets on top of the original five? Pshh, we’re good friends! Cheers to this friendship lasting long and true!

“It’s been a while since I visited a hot spring. I hear they’re great

for lower back pain. This does sound like a rather attractive offer.”

“Gerard, you aren’t planning on entering the water in your armor, are you?! According to a book I read, hot springs are a place for ‘heart-to-heart talks with no walls and no clothes in the way.’ You aren’t getting out of taking off your armor this time!”

“Save me, my king! Sera is trying to strip me naked!”

“As someone who’d be entering the same side of the baths as you, honestly, I’m with her on this. You can materialize, can’t you? We wouldn’t want to be a nuisance to the other customers, so give it up, man.”

“Both my king and Sera would have me abandon the Way of the Knight?!”

Even after all this time, I still don’t understand how your “Way of the Knight” thing works. In this case, Sera’s in the right.

“Hey, Kel-nii, it says ‘rent out’ right here on the ticket. Does that mean we’d have the springs to ourselves?”

“Seriously? Wow, you’re right. In that case, I guess I’m the only one who’d be affected by Gerard? All right, then. Just make sure to wash up properly before going in, okay?”

“Way to go, Rion! I’d expect nothing less from my grandchild! My angel!”

“Oh my g— Urgh, Gramps, it hurts when you rub your helmet against my face!”

Leaving the doting grandparent bit aside for now, Tsubaki-sama is sure being generous, reserving the whole place for us. Also, thinking about it now, it would be pretty awkward if the first time I saw Gerard’s face was while we were in a hot spring together. So, I suppose this works out for me too, all things considered. Anyway, let’s take a closer look at these tickets. Does it say when the reservation is for?

“Let’s see, let’s see. ‘During the period specified below, you may enjoy having the Phantom Spring Ryokan all to yourself— wait, ryokan? As in, a traditional Japanese inn?’ So, it’s the entire facility that we’re renting out and not just the hot springs?”

“Honey, nobody in this world knows what ‘Japanese’ means, but you’ve got the general idea. And wow, this is incredible. The ticket does promise to let us have the entire place during our stay. This is Phantom Spring Ryokan, a five-star inn that’s normally completely booked several months in advance by royalty, nobles, and wealthy merchants. How in the world did the Queen of Toraj manage to arrange something like that?”

This is alarming information that you’re spouting so casually, Melfin-sensei! Can you not, please?! If you say one more word, I’ll feel like I’m really being pressured to accept this! Please let me remain ignorant and blissful.

Efil picked up one of the tickets. "Allow me to confirm the details. The reservation is for one week, starting tomorrow, which means we can head over first thing using the teleportation gate. Each guest requires a ticket, and we have...nine tickets here."

"Nine, huh? Well, there's me, Rion, Efil, Sera, Mel, Gerard, and...wait, do Alex and Clotho need tickets?" *Even if we bring them along as family members, the ryokan might count them as pets. And would the place even accept them? Alex's appearance did turn quite a lot more fierce after his Evolution. Would a five-star inn allow him inside?*

"Don't worry, honey, I don't think it'll be a problem. Their main customer base is the nobility. Dealing with odd and eccentric requests is probably an everyday occurrence for them. Once they find out that you're a Summoner, I'm sure they'll be willing to be flexible. Just in case, though, let's set aside two tickets for Clotho and Alex. And if it turns out they don't need them and the inn won't count their portion of food towards the booking, I'll be more than happy to eat everything on their tickets too!"

I see. That last one is her true intention, I'm sure. But what she says does make sense, so let's go with it.

"Okay, then we'll count Alex and Clotho for now. That makes for a total of eight. Hmm, I really want to bring Ellie and Ruka along, but we don't have enough passes for both of them." *Those two did a great job of looking after the house in our absence. This could have served as a well-deserved reward and a chance to wind down, but...*

"How can this be?!" Gerard gasped. "Ughhhh...tough times call for tough decisions. I shall sit this one out, my king!"

"You can't do that, Grandpa Gerard!" Ruka protested. "This is *your* reward for always helping Master out on his adventures! You have to go!"

"We are truly thankful for the consideration, Gerard-sama, but Ruka is right. Please do not worry about us and enjoy yourself."

"B-But..."

"I said you can't, so you can't!"

The mother and daughter both firmly rebuffed his attempt to yield his own place in the party to them. In fact, given how vehement they were about it, I half expected them to say something along the lines of, "Accepting something from Master while a member of his family goes without is absolutely outrageous and a direct affront to the Way of the Maid!" Honestly, I was a little surprised by Ruka's reaction.

Just like with Efil and Ellie, it seems the pride of a maid is also starting to blossom within her.

"Looks like you aren't going to win this one, Gerard," I chuckled.

"Ugh..."

"It just didn't work out this time, but I'll make it up to you two

another day. I promise.”

“No, no, Master, we can’t very well impose —”

“This isn’t up for debate, Ellie. I’ve made up my mind, and there’s no changing it.”

“I knew my king would pull through!”

And I’m more than willing to pay for it myself. I’ll find the best experience that money can buy them. Muahahaha. Just you wait.

“Aww shucks, if Master puts it that way, then we can’t say no, can we?” Ruka grinned cheekily, prompting a rather scandalized “Ruka!” from her mother.

“Come now, where’s the harm? Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Master! Goodness, both you and Gerard-sama spoil Ruka far too much.”

Well, anyway, that’s still going to be little ways off. I’m sure they’ll continue to do great work until then, so everything should work out. All right, that’s enough of this topic. Now we have to figure out what to do with the last remaining ticket.

“That leaves us with one final spot. Who should we invite?”

“How about Ange-san, Master? She took great care of us on the day of the ceremony, and is constantly looking out for us at the guild.”

“Ange? Hmm...”

It’s true she went to quite a bit of trouble for us the other day. And given how tired she looked, this could make for a timely stress reliever. Not that it would replace my promise to grab a meal with her; we can do that some other day. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I like the idea.

“I think I just might do that. If no one has any other suggestions, I’ll go ask her now. That sound good?”



With our vacation dates upon us, we had to use every moment to prepare. After finishing my breakfast, I immediately headed for the Adventurer’s Guild to see Ange.

I pushed open the all-too-familiar door and, as expected, found her in the middle of assisting adventurers. The entire place was crowded, with quite a few new faces among those who had probably come to town for the ceremony. And as usual, the queue at her counter was the longest. I decided to obediently wait in line.

As I walked towards the back, my eyes met those of another female staff member. I hadn’t had much opportunity to speak with her directly and mainly only knew her by face, but I remembered that she was one of Ange’s closer co-workers. She clapped her hands together once, as if she had figured something out, then started walking towards Ange’s counter at a brisk pace.

Is it just me, or did she smirk after catching sight of me?

The woman whispered something into Ange's ear, then they both looked up at me. After that, she pounded Ange's back a few times and practically seized her counter, shooing her away with enthusiastic hand gestures and a gentle smile. As an adventurer moved to complain about the sudden change of personnel, the pressure emanated from that very same smile convinced him to reconsider.

"Isn't that guy one of the strongest members of Ange's fan club?" I wondered aloud. *I've had this suspicion for a while now, but could it be that the receptionists are all really, really powerful? Ange manages to slip behind my back and catch me unawares all the time, too.*

"Kelvin...san. I will be handling your inquiry. This way, please."

"S-Sure."

I found myself escorted from my place at the end of the line to an unoccupied table. Ange seemed quite flustered, barely catching herself from forgetting the honorific.

"You sure this is okay? Now it looks like I skipped quite a few places in line."

"Kelvin-san, you are a Rank S adventurer, a member of the most exclusive group in the entire world of adventurers. Giving you priority treatment is entirely natural. At least, that's what my co-worker said before invoking an authority that I do not think she possesses to name me your, um, personal handler. Yep."

The last part of Ange's reply had gradually devolved into a mumble, and her face was all red. *Ange's friend, can you not tease her so much, please?*



"A hot springs trip?"

"Mh-hmm. Would you be interested?"

After some small talk gave Ange time to calm down a bit, I finally brought up the main topic. There was no doubt in my mind that she was tired, seeing how busy the place was, compounded by how much longer the line at her counter was compared to the others.

Consequently, a hot springs trip — a tried and true way of recovering from fatigue — seemed to be exactly what she needed at the moment. I could not recommend it more as her friend.

The only problem was whether she could actually take the time off or not. Unlike adventurers, who were largely free to come and go as we pleased, guild staff had strict hours and shifts.

"I know this is really sudden, but I wanted to invite you. The location is..."

"....."

"I know you probably also have things you'd need to prepare. We'll do our best to match our schedule with yours..."

“.....”

“...and that’s about it for the details. So, what do you think?”

Ange had all but frozen. While I went on and on, she hadn’t even nodded once. She was entirely motionless, as if her brain had shorted out or something. *What’s going on? I mean, if she isn’t interested, I’d appreciate her actually saying so.*

“Ange? Ange-saaaan?” I waved my hands in front of her face. There was still no response, so I tried giving her cheeks a few pokes.

“G...”

“Gi-what?” *Finally, a reaction.*

“GUILDMASTER! GUILDMASTEEEER!”

In a startling one-eighty from her state of complete silence, she abruptly leaped out of her chair and barreled towards Rio’s office.

Wait, was the cheek-poking going too far?! Is she reporting it to Rio as sexual harassment?! I don’t even want to imagine what crazy punishment he would impose on me for an accusation like that! Ange’s friend, who’s been stealing glances at us this whole time, please wipe that “Good job!” grin off your face and retract that thumbs-up!

Ange banged open Rio’s door with all her strength, shouting, “Guildmaster, excuse me!”

Ah, so you’re also one of those people who actively shortens the lifespan of doors.

“Wh-What is the matter, Ange-kun? You have a rather disturbing look on your face...”

Dammit, there goes my hope that he was out. Why is he in?! And did she really hate me poking her cheek that much?

I perked up my ears from where I sat, waiting to see — no, waiting to *hear* what was happening next.

“Please give me paid leave! A super duper big chance has come to poor little me whose efforts haven’t been recognized at all lately!”

“Where is this coming from?!”

Phew, talk about a close shave. So, she’s asking him for time off. Does this mean her blank reaction before was one of shock over how happy she was to hear about the trip? Maybe she’s a lot more exhausted than I realized. Looks like I’m going to be in Tsubaki-sama’s debt for quite a while.



After Ange forcefully convinced Rio to accept her application for leave and confirmed her place in my vacation party, our remaining preparations went like a dream. We gathered before the teleportation gate early the next morning and gave everything one final check.

“Everyone ready? Nobody forgot anything?” *Technically, we could just ask Clotho to have the clone that’s staying home pick up whatever we*

want and deliver it to us through Storage, but this last-minute routine is part of the fun of going on trips! I can't just skip it!

"Hmph, do you even have to ask?"

"I *think* I got everything... hold on a moment, Kel-nii, I'll check one more time!"

"I've already bought Toraj's gourmet guide. I'm ready any time."

"I'm so sorry you have to stay home, Ruka. Take good care of yourself, all right? Promise Grandpa?"

"Don't worry, Grandpa Gerard! I'll be fine!"

All I did was ask for a final luggage check, and yet I had one companion cross their arms and smirk as if they had accomplished some incredible feat, one who fretfully went and reopened their bag, another who starting inexplicably drooling, and yet another who completely ignored me, entirely occupied with saying their farewells. The reactions were varied, to put it mildly.

"Thank you for inviting me, Kelvin. I was looking forward to it so much that I couldn't sleep a wink last night!" Ange yawned, rubbing her eyes. She was wearing clothes that seemed easy to move around in, but surrounding her was an impressive amount of hand luggage that appeared to speak volumes about her excitement.

"It makes me really happy to hear you say that."

"Ehehe...and I'd expected it, but we really are going with everyone else..."

"Sorry? What was that?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing."

"Okay, then. Oh, by the way, do you want to throw your bags into Storage? I imagine it must be quite tiring carrying all that around, right?"

"Really? I'd feel bad," Ange replied even as she held out a number of items that seemed full to bursting.

Your words aren't matching your actions, you cheeky girl.

"Then we will be taking these off your hands, Ange-san."

"Thank you, Efil-chan."

The teleportation gate was primed and ready for use at a moment's notice thanks to Ange's preparations. I took out my rainbow-colored guild card and placed it on the verification panel, then poured my magic into the contraption while fixing a mental image of Toraj's landscape in my mind.

"Oh, it worked."

The gate safely activated, which meant that Tsubaki's court mages were currently on the other side, pouring in their own magic.

"Please have a safe trip, Master," Ellie said, bowing elegantly.

"Please have a safe trip!" Ruka echoed, cheerfully waving her hands.

Hey, dark knight over there, stop waving back and get a move on already!

“Take good care of Ange-kun, Kelvin-kun. And I would appreciate it if you would strictly refrain from getting into any trouble this time.”

“I-I’ll do my best...”

I dove through the gate with the others, my conscience still prickling with Rio’s parting shot.



As expected, Tsubaki and her guards were waiting to welcome us.

“There you are, Kelvin! I watched your ceremony through the crystal. You’ve become even more important than before!”

“It was only thanks to your support, Tsubaki-sama. Thank you very much for backing up my Rank S promotion. And thank you also for the invitation and this trip! It’s a wonderful surprise!”

“Hm, I did do all that for you, did I not? So, would you have any interest in taking up the position of honorable adviser to the Tsubaki Guard —”

So, we’re doing our usual song and dance all over again? All right.

“Oh, before I forget, here are the latest baked sweets that Efil came up with. We made sure to set some aside for you.”

“Do you speak truly?!”

“I did my best. I hope you enjoy them, Tsubaki-sama.”

As a gourmet, Tsubaki’s fetish for personnel recruitment was matched only by her love of Efil’s food. My strategy was to divert her attention with confectionaries that were scrumptious enough to reduce her to a crying mess with a single bite.

“How beautiful they look! However, my nose seems to be warning me that these just might cause me to lose my dignity if I partake of them here.”

“What kind of nose is that? On another note, is the *ryokan* mentioned on the tickets within walking distance? It would be a great help if we could have a map to show us the way.”

“Do not worry about your transportation. I have already arranged for carriages to take you there directly.”

“You’re really going the extra mile for us, aren’t you?”

“Think nothing of it. This was a trip I had planned on taking myself, but an urgent matter arose. Instead of allowing the reservation to go to waste, I’d much rather you and your companions enjoy it in my stead.”

“What could be so urgent that you’d give up a week-long trip you booked in advance in order to attend to it?” *I guess being royalty has its burdens.*

“I’m sure you’ll be informed in due time. Now that you’re a Rank

S adventurer, you will find yourself being relied upon for many things. But for now, I simply wish for you to have a good time here in Toraj.”

“Ooookay. Thank you very much.” *The loaded way she phrased that really bothers me. Rely? On me? What for? Did another powerful monster on par with an evil dragon appear here? If that’s the case, I might not mind all that much.*

We chatted for a while longer until Tsubaki was pulled away by her work. The last time we visited Toraj, we’d had quite a bit of opportunity to hang out with her. Whatever was going on, the fact that she was prioritizing it seemed to be a good indicator of its importance.

Once we saw her off, a servant approached us to show us the way. We boarded a ferry that took us from Castle Toraj — a solitary structure in the middle of the sea — to the city proper where carriages were waiting for us. Each and every one of the carriages seemed fit to carry royalty and had the slight Japanese influence that I had come to expect of everything Torajian.

“Kel-nii, look inside!”

“Tatami mats on the floor?!” *With all the Japanese influence in this country, I guess I should have seen this coming. Uh, we don’t have to sit with our legs tucked underneath in the seiza pose, right?*



We were rocked about in our carriages for several hours. No, correction: there was almost no rocking whatsoever. The first time we came to Toraj, we had been driven by Rudo, a very skillful coachman who had made our journey extremely pleasant. This time, however, was an experience even better than that one. According to my coachman, our carriages were technological secrets developed within Toraj. The fact that he knew about this technology — and now we did as well — left room for doubt about how well-kept the secret actually was, but my takeaway was that Toraj was a lot more developed than I had realized. Perhaps in the same way the Shinkansen of Japan was at the technological forefront of the world’s bullet train industry, the carriages of Toraj — technically having been developed by the same bloodline — were at the forefront of this world’s carriage-making industry.

“Oh, I can see it!” Rion exclaimed excitedly, pointing out of the window that she was pressed against.

Drawn by her enthusiasm, I took a look. “Oh, wow, that’s a lot of steam. It looks like a whole hot springs town by itself.”

The stone-paved roads were lined with quaint wooden buildings, with steam billowing up from them. The characteristic smell of sulfur that filled the air evoked feelings of nostalgia in me, even though I

had no remaining memories of visiting one. Every cell in my body was kicking up a fuss, desperate to get into the water as soon as possible.

Eventually, our carriages came to a stop, and we all got off in merry spirits, chattering excitedly.

Sera, probably picking up on how I was acting, commented, “You look like you’ve been to a hot spring before.”

I shrugged. “Probably. I don’t remember it, though.”

“I’ve been to one before!” Rion chimed in. “It feels sooo good!”

Ange rubbed her brow for a moment as if thinking about it, then said, “I’ve passed by hot springs several times on guild business, but I don’t think I’ve ever actually had the opportunity to go inside.”

“It’s also my first time. I’m looking forward to it very much,” Melfina added in between bites of a snack that she had retrieved from Clotho’s Storage.

Our guide informed us that she would be returning on the date of our departure, then led the luxurious carriages back the way we had come. The stately procession gradually disappeared from view and into the steam.

We turned towards the *ryokan* and found ourselves greeted by a crowd of waitresses decked out in mauve-colored kimonos. There were so many of them that I could easily believe every member of staff had come out in full force. Describing it as a powerful spectacle would be doing the sight an injustice.

Ah, hold on, we have the place rented out, which means there aren’t any other guests to be tended to right now. So this is the norm for royalty, huh? It doesn’t make me feel good so much as it makes me feel important, but I don’t think I could ever get used to it. The commoner in me is just feeling flustered.

“Mm, as you were.” Sera, however, seemed to have no problem taking it all in stride, being a former princess and all.

I feel like the meaning of that phrase is a little off here, though. Isn’t that something you say to soldiers?



We stopped by our rooms to drop off our luggage, then headed straight for the baths. Did I hear someone asking about mixed bathing? I was at the guys’ bath, of course. It would have been a different matter if I were there with only Efil or Rion. Today, however, Ange was also with us. The mixed bathing would have to wait for a later — and more personal — time.

“Are you not done removing your clothes yet, my king? I’ve been ready for ages!”

“Arf!”

“I don’t want to hear it from the two who don’t have any clothes

to take off!"

Gerard and Alex were waiting for me, the former standing with one hand on the door that led to the spring and a towel wrapped around his waist. I had told him to go ahead, but he chose instead to stay and annoy me instead.

Still, it's pretty surreal to see a full suit of armor trying to enter a bath. I bet this is the only place in the entire world where you could witness such a scene. Oh, wait, no, I suppose I could see it at home any time. Not that I'd purposely ask to, though.

"All right, I'm ready!" I had my own towel wrapped around my own waist, and Clotho was on my shoulder. *Open sesame!*

Clatter, clatter, clatter...

"Oh, it's open-air, my king! Furthermore, it's incredibly spacious!"

Nice, so the changing room is directly connected to the outside.

The view was absolutely breathtaking. Milky-white water was pouring endlessly into an area surrounded by rocks, luring me into its seemingly bottomless depths.

Give me a moment. I need to wash myself first. That's an ironclad rule of mine. The other side of the tall bamboo partition was most likely the girls' side. In other words, that there was the frontier. *What, peeking? Of course I'm not going to peek. No, seriously, I'm not!*

"Gerard, make sure to wash your armor before going in."

"Mm, I know. Down we g— oof."

Scrub, scrub, scrub.

Soon enough, there was a headless suit of armor washing its own helmet next to me, whistling cheerfully. I couldn't help but wonder what an unrelated third party might think of the sight.

No, don't dwell on it. I came here to refresh myself. As a Rank S adventurer, I can't let such trivial things bother me. Let's just focus on washing Alex's fur.

"Is something the matter, my king?"

"Uh...no?"

"Are you quite sure? I've been feeling the weight of a rather hard stare from somewhere for a while now. Are there perhaps wild monkeys around?" the knight asked, pointing his head around left and right with his hands.

Okay, not gonna lie, that seriously bothers me.

Splash.

"Phew..."

"Phew..."

"Arfff!"

There was no way I could have suppressed that sigh of content. *Ahh, viva la hot springs. I feel warmed to my very core.*

"Oh, hey, an idea just occurred to me. Maybe I should renovate

the bath in our mansion and turn it into a hot tub.”

“That is a splendid idea indeed. It is clear that you are in Tsubakidono’s good graces, so why not try approaching her with the request? I’m sure she would be more than happy to help.”

“Hahaha, I shudder to think how fierce her solicitations would become.”

“Arfff...”

For starters, we can pass out yukatas for everyone. There are real ones here at the inn, so I’m sure Efil can reproduce them flawlessly. If I’m going to get serious about renovating the bath...I mean, I can probably do most of the work using Green Magic, but I’d definitely want someone with great architectural skills to design everything from the big stuff down to the smallest details.

“Hm?”

“You noticed, my king?”

“Uh-huh.”

Exchanging a look, Gerard and I emptied our minds and tried to become one with nature as best we could. Taking care to not make the slightest sound, we focused our attention and opened our inner eyes, the ones that see beyond. I urged Alex to do the same through my gaze.

“Oh, wow, this looks incredible!”

“It’s not bad!”

The reason for our behavior was, of course, the arrival of Rion, then Sera, and then the others on the girls’ side. Being the absolute gentlemen that we were, we would never peek; that was the act of heretics. Instead, we would simply enjoy the happy voices and splashing of water that reach us on the wind. Now *that* was an example of good manners. I only had to close my eyes and, lo and behold, I could tell from the sounds that the girls had just slipped into the water.

“This feels so good...”

“I’m melting...”

“Getting to enter the bath with everyone makes it worth finally being Summo— oh my, seems like this water has quite a number of effects.”

“Ah, you’re right. There’s a sign. Um...‘This Spring of Beauty, one among the few phantom springs of renown, bestows all who enter with smoother skin and more luscious lips.’ That’s what it says!”

“Sera, does it say anything about whether it might be more effective to drink it?”

“Uh....no it doesn’t. I’m not sure you’re supposed to *drink* this kind of water, Mel.”

“Your skin is already beautiful enough, Mel-san! How are your

proportions so amazing despite eating so much?! Like, right here — oh my god, how is your skin so smooth?! It's like silk! I'm so jealous! Look at what mine's become after all the stress from working at the guild!"

"Is it that good? I rarely pay it all that much attention, to be honest."

"Is that sarcasm?! Are you being snide right now?! Boohooohoo, Efil-chan, Mel-san is being mean to me!"

"Ah! Ange-san, you surprised me, grabbing me so suddenly!"

There was a brief pause.

"Um...Ange-san?"

"What is with these obscene boobies of yours?! Why're they so soft?! Are they filled with marshmallows?!"

"What are y—? *Ahn!* P-Please don't rub them, *ah*, any more!"

"You shouldn't do that, Ange. Any more and Efil won't be able to take it any longer! What's more, the worth of a woman is not in the size of her brea—"

"You don't get to say that, Sera-san!"

"You just don't get it, Sera-nee!"

"Why did you join her, Rion? Hold on, why are you two coming closer? I have a bad feeling about this..."

"Oh, yeah, we're having dinner right after this, aren't we? I can't wait!"

"M-Mel, help m—"

And so went the boisterous sounds that hinted at a fantastical and unseen world of reverie.

With my eyes still closed, I murmured poetically, "Echoing in our hearts..."

"...shrieks of delight," Gerard finished, having caught on.

We exchanged a look, then nodded solemnly.

"This bath really is great."

"That it is, my king. It truly has atmosphere."

In this way, we two gentlemen got to fully refresh both our bodies and minds. Even Clotho, floating lazily along the surface, seemed to be having a great time.

"Do you think even I would get smoother skin from soaking in this water, my king?"

"So much so that attacks will just slide right off your armor, I'd imagine."



The hall where we were served dinner was far too large for a party of our size. It was almost ten times the size of our dining room back home. When Gerard and I arrived, we found the food already

laid out and waiting, one fancy tray in front of each cushion, all lined up in a row.

Unsurprisingly, it was taking the girls a bit longer to get ready — with Mel being the sole exception. She was already sitting on one of the cushions when we got there. Eventually, Efil and Ange strolled in.

So, it's just Rion and Sera left. While we're waiting, let's take a closer look at the food. Damn, okay, this is a place where big shots from various countries gather, all right. There's meat, seafood, vegetables, and delicacies, every single ingredient sourced from Toraj and of the highest quality. I guess this country isn't the continent's largest exporter of consumables for nothing. And yes, I've noticed Efil just itching to try her hand at using the ingredients she's seeing in the spread before her. Hold it in, Efil. Hold it in.

“At the very least, I will steal their recipes! Without fail!” my maid swore as she glared down at her food like a predator eyeing its prey.

Seems like she isn't going to give being The Perfect Maid a rest even here. Her constant drive to improve herself never ceases to amaze me.

“Honey, honey, can't I start eating already? I can, right? I can't control myself any longer...”

On the opposite end of the spectrum was a goddess who was itching to dive in too, also staring intensely at her food like a predator would its prey, but for a very different reason. If Efil was like a faithful hunting dog who would obey all orders from its master, Mel was like a gigantic dragon that would devour everything it laid eyes on.

Honestly, I don't think I'll be able to hold her back for much longer. Please come quickly, Sera and Ri— oh, there they are! Phew, they made it!

“Sorry for the wait, everyone,” Rion apologized as she headed for her seat, her face still slightly flushed from the bath. “We stopped to drink a bottle of milk,ahaha.”

“It was delicious! What interesting customs Toraj has!” Sera added before putting a hand on her waist and pretending to throw back a bottle of milk.

I bet Rion's the one who taught her that. Good old Japanese conventions. Hold on, Mel, why have you fallen on all fours, looking so devastated? Where'd your seemingly unsuppressable hunger from just now go?

“I can't believe I forgot to grab a bottle of fruit-flavored milk after getting out of the bath! What a terrible wrong I have committed!”

So, Melfina is in the fruit-flavored milk faction. I mean, hey, I don't judge. And she was so excited about dinner that she came straight here, having completely forgotten about the milk. Does she really want to do the milk thing that badly?

“How about you take another dip afterwards, then?” I suggested.

Still looking rather frustrated, the goddess replied, “Yeah...I think I’ll do that...”

Afterwards, I asked the waitresses to redirect as much of the budget as possible towards the food itself. The hope was that this would console Melfina enough that she didn’t go too overboard when she eventually “corrected” this “wrong” of hers. The decision could be considered an unavoidable sacrifice, if you will. And to be fair, whatever else this excessive service befitting royalty offered wouldn’t have suited us anyway.

In any case, we are now all here.

“All right! Got your drinks, everyone?!” I grabbed my glass and stood up, prompting my companions to do the same with their wine and juice and whatever else. “So, once more, a toast to my promotion to Rank S, and to everyone’s efforts! Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

A beautiful sound filled the air as we clinked our glasses together.

Oh, right, before we start drinking... “Sera, just checking, but that’s not alcohol in your hand, right?”

“It’s carbonated water. Even I learn from my mistakes. Don’t worry, I’ve got this!”

Is it just me, or do those words sound like foreshadowing? I’m sure she actually meant what she said, but still...



The feast lasted until well after dark. Due to the inn’s location in the middle of the mountains, the only sounds that could be heard were the cries of insects. There was some illumination, but nothing was more dazzling than the enchanting moon hanging in the breathtakingly gorgeous night sky.

I sighed contentedly. “I think I could enter a hot spring a billion more times and still love it.”

“Technically, you’re not supposed to after you’ve had alcohol, Master.”

“I didn’t drink *that* much. You’re such a worrywart sometimes, Efil.”

“Ugh...why do I feel so flushed and faint even though I didn’t drink at all?”

“You probably got drunk on the atmosphere, Rion. It’s called the

placebo effect. Viktor taught me about it once.”

“Mm, maybe...” Rion mumbled before sinking deep enough for the water to cover her mouth as she blew out little bubbles.

Rion has the Vigor skill, so I don't think there's anything to worry about, but let's ask Mel to whip up some medicine for her later just in case.



At present, we were not in either the guys' or girls' bath. No, this was a mixed bath. And thanks to what I perceived as much-appreciated consideration on the *ryokan's* side, it was slightly smaller than the ones we had enjoyed earlier.

I was currently relaxing with Efil, Mel, Rion, and Sera. Ange had drunk herself unconscious, and Gerard was looking after her. I couldn't exactly ask her, "Hey, wanna enter the bath together?" no matter how close we were as friends, so this worked out well. I already regularly took baths with Rion and Efil back home, Sera was my girlfriend, and Mel was my (self-proclaimed) wife, so there was no problem whatsoever. *I mean, a self-proclaimed wife is still acceptable, right? Borderline okay?*

We were taking a dip before heading to bed because Melfina had really tried to sell us on how tasteful, chic (and every other synonym for "wonderful" that she could think of) it would be to enjoy bathing in the moonlight. However, that was clearly just a front, and her real aim was undoubtedly to have the experience of downing a bottle of cold milk afterwards.

She did look very bummed out about missing it before. But still, do you have to do this while eating even more? Oh, goddess, give in not to temptation. Repent!

"Is there something on my face, honey?"

"Repent!"

"What?"

Oops, my thoughts just came out when I looked at her. "Ahem. I've been wondering for a while now, but how is it that your figure remains absolutely unchanged no matter how much you eat and drink?"

Despite consuming clearly more volume than what her body should have been able to handle, her stomach wasn't even bulging, and her waistline remained as slender as ever. *Just where on earth does all that food go? It's a complete mystery.*

Melfina giggled modestly. "Oh, it's nothing. I just make sure to chew properly before swallowing."

"It looks to me like you're wolfing it down, though."

Shovel, gulp, shovel, gulp. In fact, the way she attacked food could almost be described as "drinking," considering how fast everything disappeared down her throat. "Chewing properly" was the last thing I'd call it. *Is she using her ridiculously high Agility stat to make her jaws move close to the speed of light or something? The mystery only deepens.*

"Sera-san, are you all right?"

"Mm, somehow..."

On my other side was Sera, who was so uncharacteristically quiet that Efil checked on her in concern. She was not drunk. In fact, she had done a brilliant job of dodging the foreshadowing that she herself had set up, and had made it to the end of the feast entirely sober.

“Did trying to avoid alcohol throughout the meal make it stressful for you?” I asked. “I did notice that you were really vigilant the whole time.”

“No, no! Of course not. I mean, when I get drunk, I...you know. I do have a prior record, after all. But I want to stay with you as much of the time as possible, so...”

Just like Rion, Sera sank down until half her face was underwater and started blowing bubbles. Despite not being drunk, her skin was as red as her fiery hair.

The instant I saw the face she was making, it was as if a vise had gripped my heart. *Hey, where am I supposed to direct these feelings that seem ready to burst out of my chest?*



“Gerard-saaan! Ah you listenin’ ta me?”

“Wh-What is it, Ange, lass?”

“Kelvin, o’ course! I’m appwoachin’ him so mush but he’s not, *hic*, noticin’ anythin’ I do!” Ange banged the bottom of her bottle against the tatami floor, her face as red as a tomato and her eyes unfocused.

While Kelvin had thought her dead to the world from all the drinking, she had in fact woken up while he was off in the baths and had immediately proceeded to start a second round with Gerard. The problem was, she had turned into a pretty bad drunk.

“I-Is that so? I feel that my king might actually be quite interested.”

“Reeeeeeally? Y’think I ’ave a chance?”

“M-Maybe? Maybe not?”

“Whichisit?! Am I really so ug’y?!”

“No, no! I’m sure you have a chance! You’re plenty cute, lass!”

In a surprising reversal of roles, the knight, who was normally the one to bother others while he drank, now found himself at a loss over how to handle his thoroughly sloshed companion. The only thing he could do was wish, “Please fall asleep! Please fall asleep!” repeatedly inside his head.

“Ehehe, that just might be! Mabbe. But Gerard-saaan! Ah you listenin’ ta me? I’m appwoachin’ him so mush but —”

“H-How much longer are you going to continue with this topic? This is the seventeenth time that you’ve rolled back to the start...”

Unmercifully, Ange’s complaints about Kelvin’s obliviousness continued for quite a while longer.

The next day, she woke up with a terrible hangover and spent most of the morning moaning in misery. In contrast, Sera and Efil's faces seemed to have a slight glow to them.

All in all, everyone agreed that they felt the effects of the water and were greatly enjoying themselves. In the shadows, however, was Kelvin, who looked somewhat drained and tired.

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 4: The Pristine Ice Princess*. I am Mayoi Doufu, the author whose hands are currently shaking from the terror of having to once again face the hellish task of writing an afterword. To those who have picked up this book ever since its web novel days or since Volume 1, please accept my continued heartfelt gratitude for your support.

It doesn't feel like Volume 3 went on sale too long ago, but now, in the blink of an eye, Volume 4 is being published already. Growing old really sucks, doesn't it? No, no, I must properly celebrate the series' successful continued release. This volume is the entirety of *Arc 4: Rank S Promotion* and the start of *Arc 5: Demon Lord* from the web novel. It's my first time combining content from separate arcs. If I hadn't, the length of Volume 5 would have been out of hand— no, never mind, scratch that.

In this volume, once again we see more and more new characters added to the cast. And what characters they are! I personally really, really love the design of "Ice Princess" Sylvia, who graces the front cover of this volume. Her white hood earns her extra points in my book.

Then we have Goldiana-san, whose presence takes a completely different path from Sylvia's but is no less impactful. When the illustrator, Gin Ammo-sama, sent us the insert art, my editor and I just went back and forth saying, "Oh, damn" in turn. I know I'm the one who wrote him into existence, but the chemical reaction from throwing "ridiculously buff," "homosexual man," "lacy pink dress," and "blond ringlet pigtails" all together really is something. For a while, I did almost get swept away and considered putting him on the cover instead. If I actually had *Nerves of Steel*, I might have taken the challenge— like hell I would. That aside, do keep an eye out for the future exploits of this weirdo who still has many secrets behind his powers.

Speaking of weirdos, we of course cannot forget Colette, the religious fanatic and original weirdo who played a huge role *and* messed up big time in this volume. Thanks to her unbelievably heightened sense of smell, Kelvin and Melfina's real identities were finally exposed. With her weirdness having gone up a level from having *two* objects of worship in her presence, she now passes her

days with double the excitement and double the nosebleeds. Honestly, I cannot stop appreciating how great her insert art in this volume turned out.

What was that? I've only been talking about weirdos this whole time? You're imagining things.

Last but not least, we really have to talk about Sera, don't we? She totally stole the scene with Nagua, then made huge progress as one of the story's heroines. With the addition of Rion, she seems even more like a big sister, and yet her consultations with Goldiana-san have helped her to display her girlier side as well. Getting to see her various expressions has left me more than satisfied. Now that she's Evolved and grown so much more powerful, just what kind of feats is she going to pull off next?

Hold on, it's already time to wrap things up? Ah, what a pity. There's still so much that I could have gone over, but as a corporate man, I fully understand the importance of staying strictly on schedule! Give it up already!

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / HUMAN/

■ SUMMONER

■ LEVEL: 108

■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER

■ HP: 1,540/1,540

MP: 7,800/7,800 (+5,200)

SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP - 100

SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP - 300

SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP - 1,000

SUMMONING MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY):

MAX MP -5

■ STRENGTH: 537 (+160)

■ ENDURANCE: 482 (+160)

■ AGILITY: 986

■ MAGIC: 1,448 (+160)

■ LUCK: 1,173

■ EQUIPMENT

BLACK DISASTER (RANK S)

STRENGTHENED MITHRIL

DAGGER (RANK B)

SKILL EATER (RANK S)

ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER

BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

SWORD MASTERY (RANK C)

SUMMONING (RANK S)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK B)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK B)

SMITHING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH

(RANK B)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)

DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)

SKILL EATER (LEFT)/GLUTTONY (UNIQUE SKILL)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)

[AVAILABLE SLOTS: 5]

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK B)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

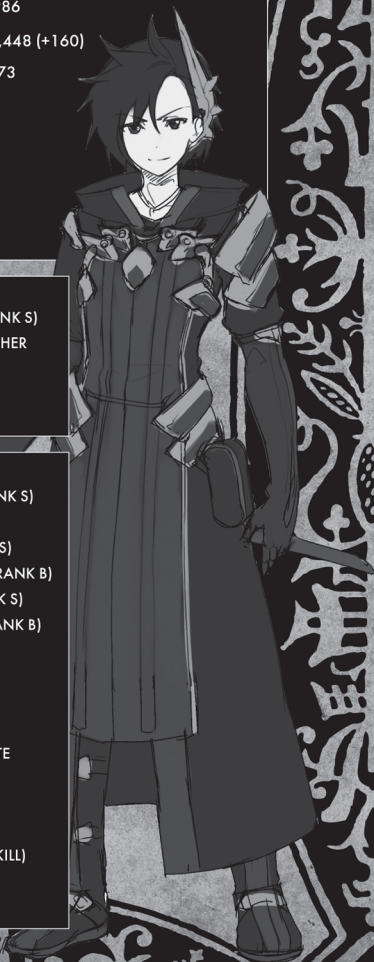
ARMY COMMAND (RANK B)

SPIRIT (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK B)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

EXPERIENCE SHARING



■ EFIL

■ 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HALF-ELF / BATTLE MAID

■ LEVEL: 107

■ TITLE: PERFECT MAID

■ HP: 856/856

■ MP: 1,645/1,645

■ STRENGTH: 431

■ ENDURANCE: 426

■ AGILITY: 1,532 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 1,030 (+160)

■ LUCK: 216

■ EQUIPMENT

PENUMBRA (RANK S)

MERCILESS (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID UNIFORM V (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID HEADRESS V (RANK S)

MAGICAL JEWEL HAIR CLIP (RANK B)

SLAVE COLLAR (RANK D)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

TAILORED LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

ARCHERY (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

FARSIGHT (RANK A)

COVERT ACTION (RANK A)

SERVICE (RANK S)

COOKING (RANK S)

SEWING (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE FLAME DRAGON KING

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ CLOTHO

■ 0 Y/O / GENDERLESS / SLIME GLUTTONIA

■ LEVEL: 107

■ TITLE: DEVOURER

■ HP: 2,110 / 2,110 (+100)

■ MP: 1,639 / 1,639 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,375 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,207 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,181 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1,034 (+100)

■ LUCK: 997 (+100)



■ EQUIPMENT

NONE

■ SKILLS

GLUTTONY (UNIQUE SKILL)

METALICIZE (RANK A)

ABSORPTION (RANK A)

DIVISION (RANK A)

DISMANTLE (RANK A)

STORAGE (RANK S)

BLUNT DAMAGE INVULNERABILITY

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ GERARD

■ 138 Y/O / MALE / HADES KNIGHT CAPTAIN / DARK KNIGHT

■ LEVEL: 109

■ TITLE: PATRIOTIC GUARDIAN

■ HP: 4,700/4,700 (+2,300) (+100)

■ MP: 468/468 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,325 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,237 (+320) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 432 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 322 (+100)

■ LUCK: 387 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF (RANK S)

DREADNOUGHT (RANK A)

CRIMSON MANTLE (RANK B)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

LOYALTY (UNIQUE SKILL)

SELF MODIFICATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK A)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

TEACHING (RANK A)

FORTITUDE (RANK A)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

IRON WALL (RANK A)

MATERIALIZATION

DARK DAMAGE RESISTANCE

SLICING DAMAGE RESISTANCE

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SELF MODIFICATION/DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF+

SELF MODIFICATION/DREADNOUGHT+

SELF MODIFICATION/CRIMSON MANTLE+

SELF MODIFICATION/GODDESS'S RING+

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SERA

■ 21 Y/O / FEMALE / DEMON BLOOD LORD / CURSED PUGILIST

■ LEVEL: 108

■ TITLE: GODDESS KILLER PUGILIST

■ HP: 2,605/2,605 (+100)

■ MP: 2,746/2,746 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,317 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,179 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,240 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1,423 (+100)

■ LUCK: 2,065 (+640) (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

ARONDIGHT (RANK S)

QUEEN'S TERROR (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)

STRENGTHENED MITHRIL GREAVES (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

BLOOD DOMINION (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLOODBENDING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)

DANCING (RANK A)

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK A)

SUPER LUCK (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY)

■ 17 Y/O / FEMALE / ANGEL / VALKYRIE

■ LEVEL: 95

■ TITLE: GLUTTONOUS GODDESS

■ HP: 1,365~1,455 (+1,073~1,163)

■ MP: 1,749~1,995 (+1,418~1,664)

■ STRENGTH: 1,749~1,995 (+1,643~1,889)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,749~1,995 (+1,643~1,889)

■ AGILITY: 1,749~1,995 (+1,643~1,889)

■ MAGIC: 1,749~1,995 (+1,643~1,889)

■ LUCK: 1,749~1,995 (+1,643~1,889)

■ EQUIPMENT

HOLY SPEAR LUMINARY (RANK S)

VALKYRIE MAIL (RANK S)

VALKYRIE HELM (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

ETHER GREAVES (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

DIVINE BINDING (HIDDEN SKILL)

SYMPATHETIC RESONANCE (UNIQUE SKILL)

SPEAR MASTERY (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

BLUE MAGIC (RANK S)

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

ACCESSORY CRAFTSMANSHIP (RANK S)

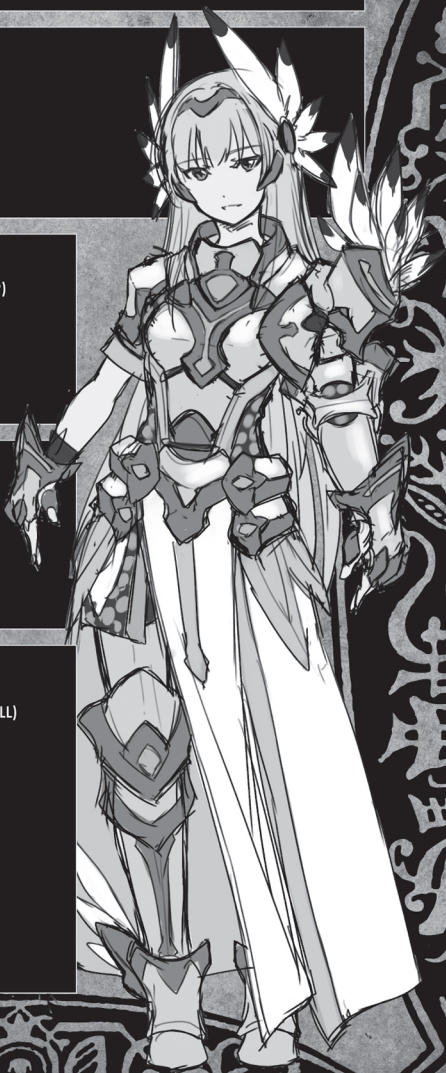
ALCHEMY (RANK S)

HEARTY EATING (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ RION

■ 14 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / SWORD SAINT

■ LEVEL: 92

■ TITLE: GIANT-KILLER HERO

■ HP: 1,096/1,096

■ MP: 1,212/1,212

■ STRENGTH: 821

■ ENDURANCE: 603 (+320)

■ AGILITY: 1,210

■ MAGIC: 1,201 (+320)

■ LUCK: 614

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD CALADBOLG (RANK S)

FAUX HOLY SWORD WILL (RANK A)

BLACK RECESS (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

RESIDUAL SLICE (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

SKY WALK (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MIND'S EYE (RANK A)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK B)

COMPANIONSHIP (RANK A)

VIGOR (RANK A)

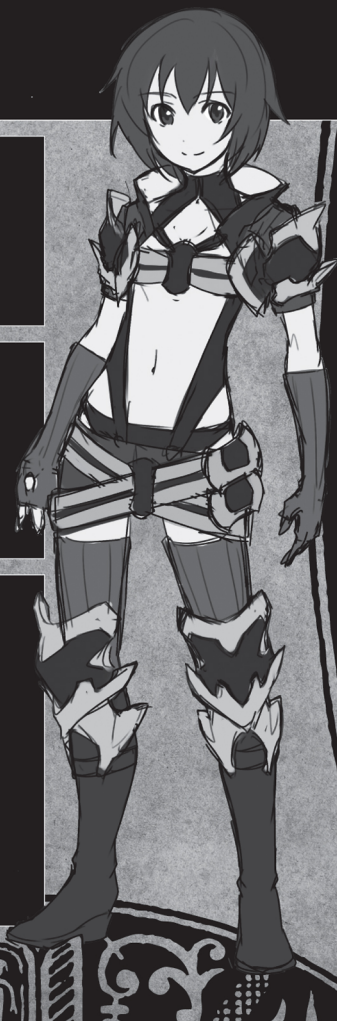
MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK A)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ ALEX

■ 3 Y/O / MALE / HRÓÐVITNIR

■ LEVEL: 92

■ TITLE: HERO'S PARTNER

■ HP: 1,637 / 1,637 (+100)

■ MP: 560 / 560 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,154 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 712 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 889 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 556 (+100)

■ LUCK: 498 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

LETHAL OPIATE SWORD

(RANK S)

GODDESS'S COLLAR

(RANK S)

■ SKILLS

SHADOW TRAVEL (UNIQUE SKILL)

CREEPING DARKNESS (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

OLFACTION (RANK A)

COVERT ACTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK B)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ SYLVIA (LUNOIR VICTORIA)

■ 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / MAGIC
SWORDSMAN

■ LEVEL: 99

■ TITLE: ICE PRINCESS

■ HP: 1,088 / 1,088

■ MP: 1,332 / 1,620

■ STRENGTH: 472

■ ENDURANCE: 316

■ AGILITY: 993

■ MAGIC: 852

■ LUCK: 749

■ EQUIPMENT

ICE SABER NOBLE ORBIT (RANK S)

LIGHT ARMOR OF SILVER ICE (RANK A)

WHITE EMBRACE (RANK S)

SKIRT OF SUPREMACY (RANK B)

GREAVES OF SAFETY (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

MAGIC ARMOR (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

BLUE MAGIC (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MIND'S EYE (RANK A)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK B)

TEACHING (RANK C)

RIDING (RANK C)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK A)

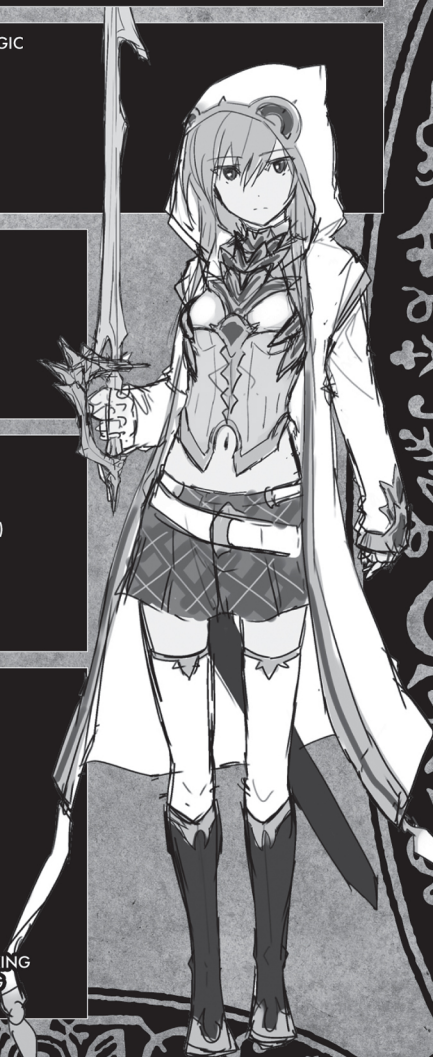
HEARTY EATING (RANK A)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE WATER DRAGON KING

BLESSING OF THE ICE DRAGON KING

CONCEALMENT (RANK A)



■ GOLDIANA PRETTIANA

■ AGE? THAT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU ASK A LADY.
BUT I'M ALWAYS 17 AT HEART!
/ FE(MALE) / TITAN / PUGILIST

■ LEVEL: STRENGTH IS NOT MEASURED IN LEVELS.
PEOPLE GROW STRONGER ONLY THROUGH HOW
DEEPLY THEY LOVE!

■ TITLE: PEACH OGRE

■ HP:

A MAIDEN'S SECRET ♥

■ MP:

■ STRENGTH:

■ ENDURANCE:

■ AGILITY: A MAIDEN'S SECRET ♥

■ MAGIC:

■ LUCK:

■ EQUIPMENT

PRETTY DRESS (RANK S)

BEAUTIFUL JANE (RANK S)

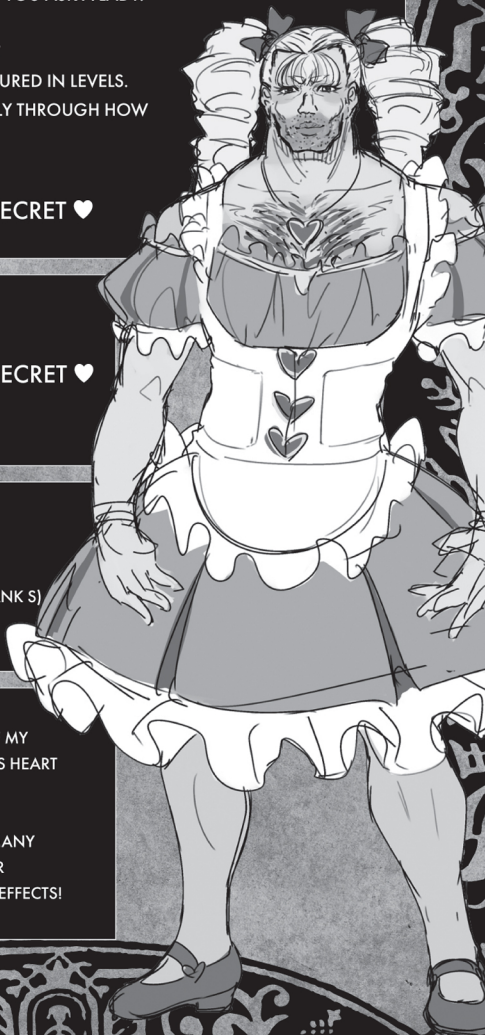
MAXIMUM HEART NECKLACE (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

WELL, I'M PRETTY CONFIDENT OF MY
COOKING. THE WAY TO A MAN'S HEART
IS THROUGH HIS STOMACH!

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

THE GLAMOR OF A LADY WITH MANY
SECRETS CAN'T BE DESCRIBED OR
QUANTIFIED THROUGH PASSIVE EFFECTS!



Bonus Short Stories

Princess Shutola's Relaxation Time

Princess Shutola Trycen, the nation's one and only princess, was noble, beautiful, and so intelligent that she had seized the position of General of the Black Ops despite her young age. Although she wasn't much for expressing her emotions, her upright figure and long list of achievements earned her much love and respect from the country's citizens, and her face was considered one of *the* representative faces of Trycen as a country.

Naturally, Trycen itself valued her highly as well. A lot of national politics and military matters ended up piled onto her table on a daily basis. Add to that the neverending gazes of jealousy from her stepbrothers, and one could imagine the amount of stress she was under.

Interestingly, the person who troubled her most was her only blood brother, Tabura. To his credit, he never harassed her, but cleaning up the trouble he caused was often quite the undertaking, as if she did not already have enough to manage when it came to what Azgrad, a war-loving stepbrother of hers who had also climbed the ranks to the position of general, tended to get up to. Their father, King Zel, seemed to be acting out of character lately too.

The point was, Shutola had a mountain of things to worry about, and she was growing increasingly stressed by the day.

I want something fluffy so badly...

Once her stress levels reached a particular threshold, there was a certain something that she would turn to for a mental respite. As a living representation of the saying "You know yourself best," she was capable of internally gauging the amount of stress that had built up within her and determining when she needed a release. Today was one such day.

"Satella."

"Present."

A girl clothed in black appeared seemingly out of nowhere in response to her voice.

"Today is when the plan is supposed to come to fruition. Are all preparations in order?"

"Everything is on schedule. The other side has sent a notice of completion. I believe it is almost time."

“Perfect. Bring it to my room once it arrives.”

“As you command.”

Satella’s figure disappeared before Shutola’s eyes. The latter paid it no mind, merely turning and heading for her personal quarters.

Click.

“I’m back, everyone,” she cried with the kind of carefree smile she almost never displayed outside.

She was not speaking to anyone, because there was no one in the room. Instead, plushies filled every corner — some bears, some cats, more bears, a few dogs, and were bears mentioned yet? — along with cute knickknacks and shiny accessories. And right next to the shelves that were filled with obscure books? Plushies. Next to stacks of important documents atop her desk? Palm-sized plushies. Her canopied bed was, of course, filled with them too. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find a spot in the room that was *not* occupied by one.

Shutola headed for her bed almost at a trot. When she reached it, she sat down on the edge, reached for her favorite plushie, and hugged it tightly. Her mannerisms were just like those of a child.

“Ahhhhh, you’re all so fluffy!”

Her smile was one that came from the very bottom of her heart, one that seemed as if she hadn’t a single care in the world. There was no denying it: Princess Shutola loved plushies very, very much. It was only because she had them that she could make it through each day; that was how strong and deep her love for them (especially the bears) was. Her collection, which she had been adding to since childhood, now numbered in the hundreds. There were far too many to fit inside her room, so quite a few were carefully stored in her personal treasure room.

“Listen, everyone, you’ll be meeting a new friend today! I had him specially made by a famous craftsman on the Western Continent! With the country as it is right now, I had to work quite hard just to get the order in. I might have used a few Black Ops members in the process...but that’s a secret, all right? It was just a side task; they all did it as a small detour while on an actual mission, so it’s fine! But listen, everyone...”

Shutola was hugging each of her plushies in turn, jabbering nonstop in a childlike tone. A short while later, she heard the sound of something being set down beside her open door. She whirled around and, sure enough, it was a large gift-wrapped box.

“It’s here!”

In the same way she had trotted to her bed earlier, she now trotted to the box. Her heart was beating like a drum. She could not wait a moment longer to open it up.

“Welcome, Mr. Bear! Thank you for reach— wait.”

There was indeed a plushie inside the box. It was, in fact, a very cute one, sporting chestnut-colored fur and round, shiny eyes. It was not, however, a bear.

“A mino...taur. Satella, this isn’t it...”

That day, Princess Shutola was not able to release any of her stress after all.

The Oracle’s Travel Preparations

The Holy Empire of Deramis was the home and holy land of the Holy Order of Rinne, the world’s most dominant religion. From its location on the western side of the Eastern Continent, this world power focused its efforts on spreading the teachings of Rinne — which involved the worship of Melfina, the Goddess who managed their world — throughout the land.

The man who stood at the top of the country, Pope Philip Deramilius, almost never appeared in public. Rather, it was his second-in-command, Colette Deramilius, who handled most of the governmental duties, performed the rites, and led the religious activities.

Aside from keeping up with her prayers as the Oracle, Colette also preached to the lay believers, represented Deramis in conferences with other countries, distributed food to the needy, and helped out at an independent orphanage. All in all, she was extremely busy.

Today, she had received an invitation to represent Deramis at a ceremony in Parth, the City of Peace, to celebrate the birth of a new Rank S adventurer. After wrapping up her packing, she had paid a visit to the orphanage, which she had a long and close history with, in hopes of taking a breather. The old lady who served as the director had come out to escort her to the parlor in person.

Colette sighed blissfully. “That is just what I needed. Thank you for bearing with me despite the sudden visit, Sister Marigan.”

“Oh, please think nothing of it, Oracle. An hour or two of an old lady’s time is nothing compared to everything you’ve done for us.”

“Come on, can you not call me Colette again? ‘Oracle’ sounds so distant and formal.”

“I called you by your name back then only because you were hiding your identity! When I found out who you were, I thought my poor heart was going to stop.”

“Well, I didn’t have much of a choice, considering how well-known my face is.” Colette offered a slightly troubled smile. But a sip of tea later, her face was back to looking content. “This is truly delicious. Sweet things really are the best for fatigue.”

“This is the milk tea that our orphanage is so proud of. The kids squeeze the milk directly from the cows. Did you know that? They’re so good at it, they sometimes get called to help out on the nearby farms.”

“That sounds wonderful. Maybe I should give it a try myself someday.”

“Oh, you’re absolutely welcome to join us anytime.”

Their peaceful conversation was suddenly interrupted by boisterous noises coming from just outside the room.

“Ria! The brat’s gone that way! Catch him!”

“Hah! Like slow-footed Sister Ria’s going to catch me!”

“Waaaah, wait for meee...”

Several sets of footsteps pounded loudly past, as if several people had run down the corridor. Judging from the voices, Colette determined it to be a child who had done something naughty and two sisters who were chasing him down.

“Oh dear, they’re at it again. I’m so sorry, Oracle. The children are simply too rambunctious.”

“I don’t mind at all! Children are supposed to be bright and energetic; you might even say it’s their duty to be so. I’m glad that they seem so full of life.”

“There are limits, though. Sister Atra is such a tomboy and so spirited, whereas Sister Ria is rather scatterbrained and careless. Between them, they never seem quite able to keep the children in line.” The old lady sighed, but there was a smile on her face. It was obvious that despite her grumbling, she loved the orphanage very much.

After exchanging some more small talk with her, Colette made her way out. Speaking with Sister Marigan had helped to put her heart at ease and was so enjoyable that Colette had wanted to stay with her a while longer. However, Cliff had informed her by way of telepathy that it was about time to return, as the carriages heading for Parth were now prepped and ready.

She suppressed her feelings of regret as she made her way back to the palace. Even so, her steps were light, her heart felt lifted, and she was humming to herself internally. Was it because of the top-quality tea? Or was it a lingering effect from the warm atmosphere at the orphanage? Either way, the Oracle was feeling so good that she had to consciously stop herself from skipping.

I’d dropped by hoping for a brief respite yet ended up truly taking time to relax. I really must thank Sister Marigan and the children. But moving on...

She turned eastward and sniffed several times, concentrating on her sense of smell.

What is this unbelievably dazzling and divine scent that I seem to be catching from that direction? What's more, this fragrance...

A question mark appeared over her head as she gazed towards the far horizon where Parth lay. She herself was not aware of it, but there was a sparkling strand of drool leaking from the corner of her alluring lips.

Then the Oracle of Deramis, Colette, set off for Parth, the promised land. Despite not knowing what lay in wait for her, be it deity or ogre, she found her heart leaping with excitement for some reason.

Veteran Adventurers in the Shrine of the Puppets

Even after Kelvin's promotion ceremony was over, the festivities in the city continued for quite a while. During this time, the Adventurer's Guild announced that it had completed its examination of the new dungeon that Sera and her group had discovered. This branch-off within Clayworm Passages was officially registered as "Shrine of the Puppets," a Rank A dungeon under Parth's jurisdiction.

Since Goldiana had bowed out, it was Sera — as the representative of her group at the time — who had been named the discoverer. Only Rank A and Rank S adventurers were allowed inside, with an exception made for Rank B adventurers who had registered their trip beforehand and signed an agreement that they would not hold the guild responsible no matter what happened to them.

The news spread like wildfire among the adventurers, and rumors about the party that would be next to challenge the dungeon sprang up everywhere. It being a newly-discovered place meant that most of it would be untouched, with plenty of treasures and riches ripe for the taking. However, very few stepped forward to claim the honor. Or to be more specific, almost nobody did. After all, Parth was famous as the city with the lowest-ranked adventurers, and only a small subset even fulfilled the minimum requirement of being Rank B. Many people passed by the opening in Clayworm Passages to steal a glimpse of the long tunnel, but that was it.

If one was to mention the only notable individuals who actually met the requirements, it would have to be Parth's most seasoned adventurer, Uld, and his party of muscular veterans with their ax-wielding teenage apprentice.

"Don't you think it's still a bit early for us, Uld-san?"

"We're just taking a look! We're going to be shooting for the Rank A exams one day, aren't we? We might be a bit older than the young'uns, but we should still stoke our ambitions and actively work towards improving ourselves."

“Yeah, don’t be a chicken, bow-muscles.”

“Who do you think you’re calling ‘bow-muscles,’ you weak-ax?!”

“Are you belittling axes?! You’d have to be blind not to see how cool axes are!”

“Okay, that’s enough, you two. I repeat, we’re only taking a look. Let’s make doubly sure not to bite off more than we can chew, you hear?”

The teenager was Rank D, but he was allowed into the dungeon as a member of Uld’s party. In terms of raw strength, he likely possessed potential beyond that of his own rank.

“According to what Ange-chan said, once we’re through this tunnel, we should be coming out into a large plaza occupied by puppet-like monsters. Despite being humanoid in shape, they have access to a wide variety of attacks beyond conventional weapons, such as firing balls of light and whatnot. Everyone, stay on your toes,” Uld warned from his position at the front of the procession as he proceeded warily, lighting their way with the torch in his hand.

Before long, the party could make out a humanoid silhouette up ahead. They exchanged glances, readied themselves for combat, and silently crept forward.

“Well, hello there. You gentlemen also here to explore the new dungeon?”

The group had intended to close the distance without being discovered, but they had clearly failed. Their target wasn’t even a monster, as they had assumed, but a fellow adventurer — a beastkin — who was a bit of a rare sight in these parts. Chances were he had come to town to attend Kelvin’s promotion ceremony.

A second look revealed even more people beyond.

“That we are. From your ‘also,’ I’m assuming it’s the same for you?” Uld asked the stranger, who had the appearance and aura of a military man.

Before the other answered, however, a beastkin of a smaller build at his side looked up and asked tiredly, “Did someone come, Akgasan?” He seemed a bit sluggish and was cradling a wounded arm.

Seeing his arm, the apprentice snorted. “What’s this? You got done in by the monsters in there? How careless.”

The military beastkin roared with laughter. “Hey, Guin, even a child is making fun of you!”

“Can’t I get a bit of acknowledgment for scouting out the place solo and making it back in one piece?!” the wounded one cried indignantly.

They seemed to be good guys. Uld’s fist fell like a hammer on his youngest party member’s head. “Do you *have* to go around picking fights with everyone?!”

“OUCH!”

“I’m so sorry for my companion’s disrespect. We came here hoping to try our hand at the dungeon. Are you about to head out? I see your companion is injured.”

“Ah, no, we’re still in the middle of it. The two of us were stationed here as lookouts. We have two more who’re currently inside — oh, you can see them there.”

The military man pointed towards the plaza where a few figures were fighting. A male beastkin was cutting down puppets with his sword while a female beastkin was brandishing her bare fists. Despite being surrounded by more than ten opponents, the two of them looked like they had the upper hand.

Uld and his party stood stock-still, staring. They realized that their eyes could not keep up with the movements of the puppets, not the ones spewing fire nor those shooting balls of light. The beastkin were moving even faster than their enemies, leaving Uld’s group of Rank B adventurers without the faintest idea of what was going on.

“Uh, that’s...what on...”

“Damn. So that’s what a Rank A dungeon is like. Yeah, all right, it’s still way too early for us,” Uld conceded. Then a slightly nervous look came over his face as he turned towards the beastkin standing before him. “So, who *are* you guys?”

“Oh, we’re nobody important. We’re just a group of adventurers who decided to visit other countries for training purposes.”

Uld thought to himself, *How damn big is this world? The difference between them and us is like heaven and earth. Looks like we still need to put on a lot more muscle!*

The veracity of that conclusion aside, Uld and his companions returned home and worked hard at weight training, and their stats did climb up a notch once again.

Conversation Between a Maid and a Demon

Today was a day with plenty of sunshine, which made it a perfect day for doing laundry. Ellie and Ruka, two maids employed by Kelvin’s household, had been bustling to and fro since early that morning. Laundry was all well and good, but this was the kind of day that made people want to go outside and play.

Sera, who had recently confessed her feelings to Kelvin, wasted no time in looking for him, hoping to invite him out.

“So, how did it go?” asked Efil.

“Ugh...why ask when you already know? He was fast asleep,” the demon sighed glumly, taking a sip from her cup of black tea.

Efil, who was sitting across the table on the mansion’s balcony,

looked unsurprised. “Master got almost no sleep last night, after all. He went right back to bed after waking up this morning.”

“He must be *really* tired to go back to sleep after *you* woke him up. What happened yesterday? You sleep with him practically every night, so you’d know— oh, um...is *that* what happened?” Sera’s face suddenly turned as red as her hair. It was not hard to imagine what had come to mind.

“Unfortunately, that was not the case. This time, it was because he was so immersed in his hobby.”

“Oh! His hobby! Right! Of course!”

“And even if it *was* what you were thinking, I always put his physical condition above all else. When I service him, I keep an eye on when to stop. My aim is to let him finish refreshed *and* wake up refreshed. That is something I would never compromise on,” Efil said firmly. There wasn’t a speck of embarrassment on her face; rather, her expression was one of pride.

The overwhelming amount of experience that Efil seemed to have over her left Sera speechless. Thinking it over, she had been rather astounded by how forward Efil was during their joint session the morning after she’d confessed to Kelvin.

Sera groaned a little in chagrin, then declared, “Even so, I’m not going to lose to you!”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m not going to lose!” Sera repeated, this time pointing a finger. She had a rather competitive streak in her.

“Um, I’m not sure this is really a contest...”

“Ugh, look at that composure of a winner...or is that just how magnanimous you are? Um...Efil, I want to learn what you know about Kelvin. Like, what makes him happy, things like that.”

“The sun would set if I’m to cover everything. Is that okay with you?”

“Give it to me a little at a time, please?”

And so the seminar began. Sera threw herself into it, furiously taking notes in a memo pad and pounding the facts into her head. Stirred by how dedicated she was, Efil also gave the lesson her best, thoroughly going over each piece of knowledge in her head. A lot of it was rather trivial, such as Kelvin’s tell-tale mannerisms when he was feeling peckish, or how his bed hair looked when he woke up, but for Efil, every one of those details were among the most important things in the world.

“Next is how to determine how sleepy Master is feeling from the angle of his eyes —”

“Hold on! I’ve completely filled up this memo pad!”

“Oh dear, that is a problem. I haven’t even gone over one percent

of what I wanted to share..." Her shoulders drooped with disappointment. At this rate, forget sundown...the seminar would take several days.

"I suppose there's no other way. We shall have to pick this up another time."

"Sadly, you're right. But I'll make sure to study up on everything you taught me today!"

"I wish you the best, Sera-san!"

"And I you, Efil!"

The two clasped each other's hands firmly, symbolizing the forging of a new bond. It would be uncouth to inquire as to what it was they were wishing each other the best in.

"That reminds me, Mel's been entering Kelvin's bed quite frequently as of late as well, right? Could it be that she's also —"

"That is not the case. Mel-sama truly goes there only to rest. She falls asleep within three seconds of lying down."

"Three...seconds?"

"Three seconds, yes."

The speed at which the Goddess could fall asleep was truly world class.

"And, um...Mel-sama's positioning while asleep is quite dynamic. Master, who sleeps next to her, often ends up taking several merciless attacks."

"Attacks? Aren't you exaggerating a bit?"

"I did not say that as a joke. Recently, Master informed me that he was making fair progress in learning how to train even while sleeping."

"It's *that* bad?!"

The Goddess's restless sleeping habits were also world class.

Since her memo pad was already covered in notes, Sera secretly burned this fact directly into her mind.

The Goddess's Gourmet Tour in Toraj

The Torajian Gourmet Guide

When talking about the gourmet scene on the Eastern Continent, one simply cannot go without mentioning the capital city of Toraj. Surely it is not news to readers that this locale is bordered by the wide-open Dragon Sea and boasts a booming fishing industry. There is, of course, also the Dragon Sea Morning Market, an extravaganza where one may find a staggering variety of fresh seafood being sold for shockingly low prices. If you ever have the opportunity to visit this city, do not let your aversion to waking up early prevent you from stopping by the market; it is simply too grand and too full of

wonderful surprises to pass up!

In addition, we would be remiss if we failed to remind you of the hot springs and restaurants serving the bountiful harvests from the mountains on the other side of the city. Generally, every establishment you walk into is a winner, and you can rarely go wrong no matter which dish you order. That is just how passionate the people of Toraj are when it comes to food, not to mention how well-developed their country's cuisines are.

To those of you reading and thinking, "Then what's the point of this book?" Don't worry! As your guide, I will be introducing you to my favorite restaurants and mapping them all out for you —

The Goddess Melfina was currently standing in the port of Toraj all by her lonesome. Her blue eyes were slightly teary, and she was clutching her guidebook tightly in one hand. What was she doing there? In order to answer that question, one must turn back time a little.

Kelvin and his party had been enjoying the Phantom Springs of Toraj to the fullest, and today was their last day at the resort before returning home. The day had been set aside for everyone to do whatever they wanted, and Melfina had set her eyes on the Dragon Sea Morning Market, one of the events that Toraj was famous for.

According to her guidebook, it was practically a whole festival with every type of seafood imaginable on sale, and it opened at the crack of dawn. In a truly wonderful coincidence, today just happened to be the market's opening day. There was no way that Melfina would miss it. And yet when she had woken up and thrown off her covers, she had found the sun already well on its way towards its zenith. In short, she had overslept and missed the event entirely.

She had even wasted unnecessary amounts of energy rushing to the port as fast as she could, but the festival was long over by then.

"I really wanted to visit the Morning Market..."

She had made sure to go to bed extra early the night before — nine o'clock, in fact — but had ended up sleeping for more than twelve hours. Now, she deeply regretted not having asked Efil to wake her up.

"Ha, hahaha...no, I must pull myself together. The Morning Market isn't the be-all and end-all of food in Toraj. There are plenty of restaurants specializing in seafood around the area, and I have plenty of pocket money saved up. I refuse to let this get me down!"

The ridiculous number of sticky notes protruding from the guidebook in her hand indicated just how much this goddess had planned for the day.

"First, let's hit that street of stalls close to the port. Even though

the Morning Market is over, the neighborhood has always been a famous tourist destination in and of itself. They should still be open even in the afternoon! The only issue is that the more famous the restaurant, the longer the line will be, but that's not going to stop me."

She struck out to join the line at her first stop. This particular stall was famous for serving extra-large seafood rice bowls topped with an astounding variety of fresh sashimi. The wasabi soy sauce and vinegared rice they used was said to be a match made in heaven, and Melfina had marked it as "Top Priority" on her itinerary. The queue seemed to be quite long, but...

"Hi, there, waiter, mister. Excuse me?"

"Howdy, pretty lass! What can I do fer ya?"

"I want to eat using this," she said in a low voice as she showed the man something at an angle that no one around could see.

"Th-This is Tsubaki-sama's...how on earth did you..."

"I take it you know what it means?"

What Melfina had shown the waiter was Kelvin's guild card. It bore Queen Tsubaki's personal seal, which was supposed to allow the bearer to claim various benefits throughout the country. The Goddess clearly had no qualms about exploiting the queen's authority for the sake of food.

The waiter, overwhelmed by the divine pressure that Melfina was emitting, surreptitiously guided her out of the line and towards an empty table.

"So this is the famous seafood rice bowl!"

She had, of course, ordered the largest size on offer. It was practically a mountain there on her plate. A mountain of sashimi.

"Do you need a spoon, young lady?"

"Nope, I'm fine with chopsticks."

The waiter was trying to be considerate, since her appearance clearly identified her as a tourist, but she turned down his offer with a smile. When in Rome, after all...

Despite normally preferring spoons, Melfina was dead set on using chopsticks while in Toraj. With elegant movements, she brought a mouthful of the bowl's contents to her sakura-colored lips. The nearby customers and staff couldn't help but stare in rapture.

"This is truly wonderful. The *naatu* is savory, and the *shirasu kraken*, which is said to have a distinctive fishiness that's difficult to get rid of, is also quite flavorful. I could eat this all day long."

"Thank you very much!"

"Thank you very much!"

"Thank you very much!"

The staff voiced their gratitude in harmony. For some reason,

everyone's attention was now fixed on Melfina. Was it because of the size of her order? Or was it she herself who was drawing their eyes? There was no way to know.

Sadly, this is still about ten notches below the quality of the sashimi that Efil makes. Let's ask her to whip up a seafood rice bowl later. Memorize this sight and upload it to the Network...done. There are easily more than thirty stores on this street. Time is limited and there are several other parts of the city that I want to visit, so let's sweep this street within an hour as a warm-up.

In contrast to the refinement displayed during her first bite, the Goddess's chopsticks began to move faster than the eye could see. Melfina's battle had only just begun.

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by Doufu Mayoi

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